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on Baldur's Gate 2
Todd McFarlane
on his new Monsters game
Eurocom on Sphinx
Treasure on Ikaruga
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What cost progress?

My journey into the scrutiny of game design—old-school vs. new-school, high concept vs. straightforward, hard vs. easy, etc., etc.—continues to be the subject of choice, both inner-office and with our more vocal readers. This month's arrival of Wario World coupled with playing Brute Force on "Brutal" really stirred the pot.

I've been counting the days to Wario World since seeing it for the first time at last year's E3, as I do when any Treasure action game is announced. Once it finally arrived, playing it (enthralled of course), it dawned on me how Treasure have stayed the course, true to their 16-bit roots in terms of what makes a game tick, while the rest of the industry seems to have spent the better part of the last decade in a constant state of flux, trying to figure out how to appease the masses, follow trends and innovate to keep pace with a market that seems to be growing almost too fast; a good game, after all, takes at least two years to complete, which is longer than many trends last. Modern games are all about mass appeal: from hiring professional actors to producing sophisticated cinemas to mapping whole cities. About the only thing they don't do is actually make us bleed (although I'm sure someone is working on it). Playing Wario…it's like the rest of the industry is the hare, beat to death, passed out on the side of the road, and Treasure, the tortoise, moseying by with a big fat smile on its face. As much as I love modern game design and the convergence games like Enter the Matrix promise, I just can't say enough about gifted developers like Treasure (and Yuji Naka…and Miyamoto…) and their ability to entertain by constantly improving on tried and true formulas. May we never lose this wonderful side of gaming.

Of course, the proof is in the numbers...or is it? Proportionately, I bet they need to sell far less to recoup...and with Nintendo on the box, Wario seems destined to do what he likes best: count money.

In contrast, this month's cover feature—another game I've been excited about since last year's E3—is a product of that aforementioned evolution, employing sophisticated AI that, if the player chooses, can be cranked up to staggeringly realistic heights. Immense, hyper detailed and, at times, genuinely perilous, Brute Force is a testament to where games are taking us, with difficulty settings that make it a first-rate run 'n gun for newbies or action junkies, or a tour de force for skilled gamers looking for the ultimate squad-based tactical experience. Brute Force could (should) spell the beginning of another Halo-sized franchise for Microsoft, a brand with the potential to stem into merchandising or Hollywood if they so choose, and that's exciting. So, on the one hand you have Nintendo building its brands on what got them here in the first place, and on the other, Microsoft pushing the innovation envelope, hoping to establish brands of their own. Fascinating, especially given the consoles are neck-and-neck going into a rumored second price drop...

As much as I love old-school game design and the pure fun games like Wario World promise, I just can't say enough about gifted developers like Digital Anvil (and Bungie…and Konami…) and their ability to entertain by constantly innovating beyond tried-and-true formulas. May we never lose this wonderful new side of gaming.

As this issue goes off to press, E3 is just two weeks away, and we've got tons of preparation to do in the hopes of presenting you something unique and insightful beyond the requisite show fluff, so, until next time, have fun out there! I'll see you back here in a few weeks with the mother load!

P.S. If you haven't taken the survey yet, get over to **www.playmagazine.com/survey** The results so far have been amazing...we love seeing who you are and listening to what you have to say, the end result of which will equate to a better **play** and $500 cash to one of you!

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contents

018 cover story

Brute Force

"And when you die, it's a painful experience—but what the hell, you just send another one down to replace you."

sections

010 ink

The latest on Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles, plus Sega's next wave, including Phantasy Star Online Episode III, Vectorman, and Headhunter: Redemption

008 playback

You sound off on last month's "Are games too easy feature", and one guy wants to get ahold of Rez art

026 game previews

We get our first look at the new Ratchet & Clank, and our last look at Enter the Matrix before its final review next month. Oh, and there are more games in the gallery than you can shake a stick at

056 game reviews

Delight in the first review of Treasure's awesome Wario World for Gamecube, along with Resident Evil Dead Aim and Chaos Legion for PS2

067 play online

Phantasy Star Online comes to Xbox, and the latest MechAssault content

076 anime / manga

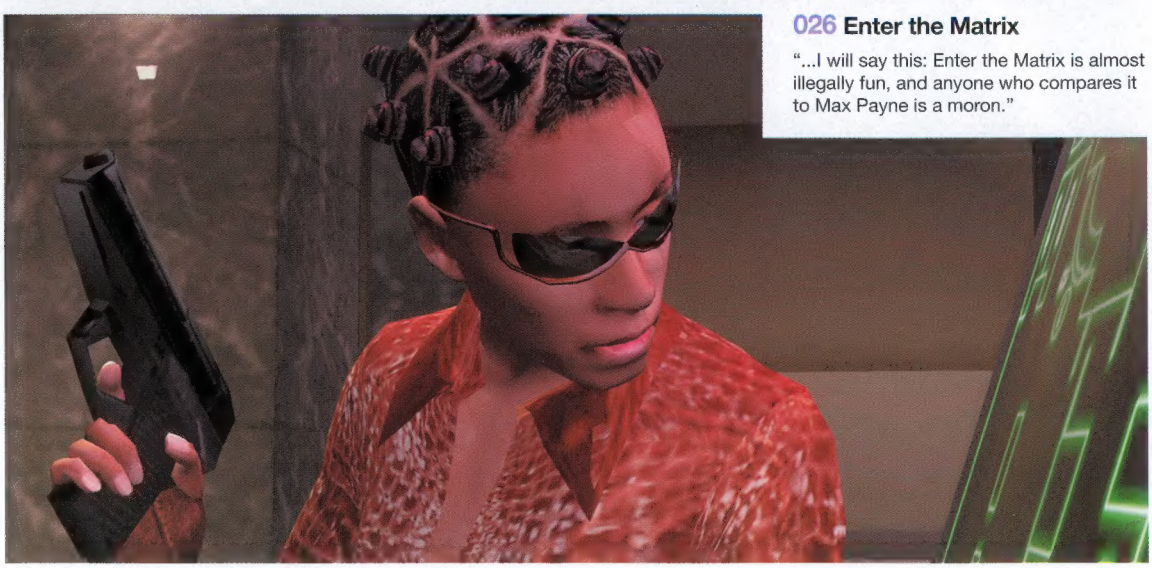
Dragonball, the anime that gets more online searches than Britney Spears, is featured this month, in addition to Kai Doh Maru, Geneshaft, and Neo Ranga

090 media

Our own Mr. Fiechter gets pulled into the Animatrix and has a transcendental experience, and we review some hot new DVD including Dark Angel Series 1 and Secretary

098 gear

Panasonic debuts a great little media player/recorder, and Samsung lets loose with a big DVD portable.



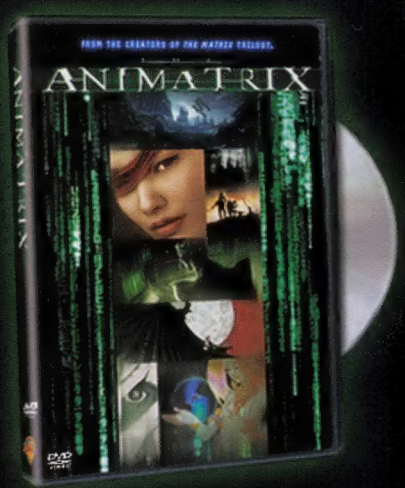
026 Enter the Matrix

"...I will say this: Enter the Matrix is almost illegally fun, and anyone who compares it to Max Payne is a moron."

060 Wario World

"Within each level—presented in three-deep side-scrolling fashion—there lie several Treasure calling cards as well as one straight out of Mario Sunshine"

FROM THE CREATORS OF *THE MATRIX* TRILOGY.



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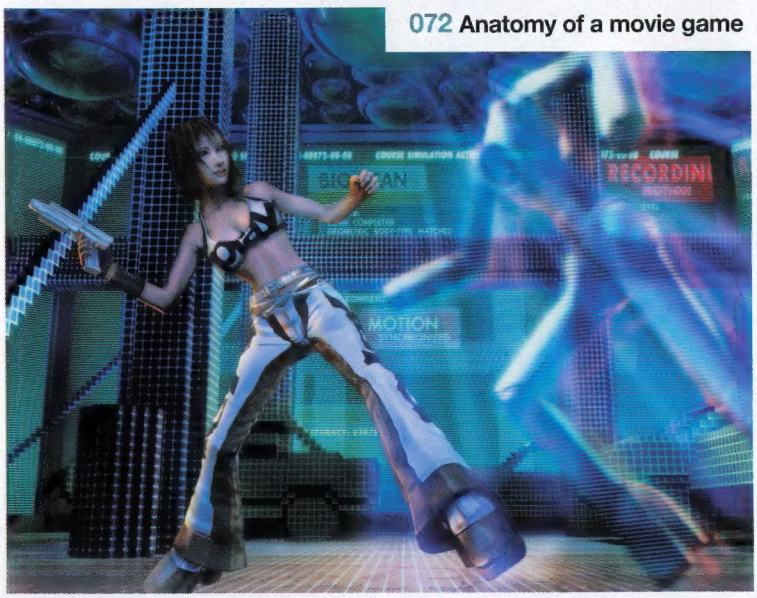
contents

054 Nintendo preview

Mario Kart Double Dash, **Pikmin 2**, F-Zero, and Kirby's Air Ride



072 Anatomy of a movie game

features

038 Sphinx and the Shadow of Set

Matt Sneap of Eurocom talks up their latest original work, the Egyptian-themed Sphinx and the Shadow of Set

040 Todd McFarlane's Monsters

As Todd McFarlane embarks on his next wave of video game ventures we spend a little quality time talking about Monsters, and what lies beyond...

042 Cy Girls speak

We caught up with Ice and Aska, the sexy cool stars of Konami's latest action thriller, in our world for a little one-on-two action

044 Treasure Interview

Masato Maegawa of Treasure, makers of some of the finest action games of all time, shared some thoughts on Ikaruga and the future of this small, deeply talented developer

046 Baldur's Gate: DA2 Interview

We spoke with Dave Maldonado, lead designer on Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance 2 about what to expect in this highly anticipated sequel

072 Anatomy of a movie game

In the second of our Developer Spotlight series, we spoke with five leading developers on the joys and pitfalls of developing games based upon film and television properties

037 P.N.03

"To put it bluntly, P.N. 03 is the stuff that action dreams are made of—pure high concept run-and-gun action injected with the hottest body in the cosmos and a fierce, smart, mechanized foe."

094 The Animatrix

Prepare for some of the most stunning Japanese animation

games index

018	Brute Force
026	Enter the Matrix
028	Ratchet & Clank 2
030	Chain Gang
031	RTX Red Rock
032	Crimson Skies
034	Freestyle MetalX
036	Downhill Domination
037	P.N.03
038	Sphinx and the Shadow of Set
040	Todd McFarlane's Monsters
042	Cy Girls
045	Sudeki
046	Baldur's Gate: DA2
048	preview gallery
054	Mario Kart Double Dash
054	F-Zero
055	Pikmin 2
055	Kirby's Air Ride
059	Lost Kingdoms
060	Wario World
063	Resident Evil Dead Aim
064	Chaos Legion
066	Burnout 2
067	Phantasy Star Online Ep. 1&2
068	Wrestlemania XIX
070	Inside Pitch 2003
071	Outlaw Volleyball
071	NCAA Football 2004

anime index

078	Dragonball
080	Sayuki
082	Kai Doh Maru
084	Neo Ranga
086	Geneshaft
088	Please Teacher
088	Gatekeepers

Bon Appétit.

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Letter of the Month

Great article! I was pleased to see the vast difference of opinion from today's game makers concerning game difficulty—imagine if all games approached it the same way...boring!! In general, I felt Brian Fleming from Sucker Punch came closest to hitting it on the head: we of the Hardcore Gamers Club have been expecting a "badge of honor" to medicate our fiendish skills since Activision started supplying the patches and stroking our egos.

At least Brian recognizes this factor and separates it from the actual enjoyment of the game—harder does not equal more fun. Personally, I would love to see more games approach the solution to the problem (the problem being: How to Appease the Hardcore While Remaining Playable to the Masses) the way Metroid Prime did—the first thing I did was turn off the hint system. I still flowed out like a madly skilled game maniac, never really felt stuck, but at least I was never TOLD where to go. I loved being lost in the original NES Metroid and I fear I will never get the feeling back like when I decided, "Oh, what the hell. Lemme just ball-up and bomb this floor right here, nuthin' else is working.... Damn! Hell naw! A SECRET passage!" Talking about the NES Metroid brings up another way to satisfy us addicts: BETTER ENDINGS FOR THE SKILLED! This is so simple to implement I truly wish developers would give it a higher importance. For the next Metroid game, I don't care if it's 3D third-person or good old 2D, just let me play without the armor on if I prove to be a good player...'cuz you know I am!

Finally, as for a general guideline, I remember reading a long time ago that Miyamoto designed his games backwards—he started with the epitome of skill he wanted his players to have at the end of the game and slowly tweaked it out to the basics. As long as I still play games for fun, this formula works for me.

Greg B.

"I was pleased to see the vast difference of opinion from today's game makers concerning game difficulty..."

Now, I'm the last person to say that gaming is going to hell in a hand basket. I need only look as far as Ikaruga or Zelda to see that isn't the case. However, the article featuring developers' takes on the situation does worry me a bit. While many of these folks made very valid points, I couldn't get past the fact that gaming is moving away from what made it: the enthusiast gamer.

Mr. Fleming's comments in particular reflect this. Gaming is better now in every way than it's ever been? One need only take a look at the ailing RPG market to see the fallacy. How sad is it that the best RPG on today's market is a mediocre version of a several-year-old game for the little 128-bit system that could? I speak of course of Grandia II, which surely stomps all over the current "champs" (I'm still trying to cope with Brady's take on Suikoden III, and the less said about FF X, the better). And don't even get me started on shooters. With the exception of the aforementioned masterpiece (do I smell a Radiant Silvergun killer? Too early to say, since I just got it today), the cupboard is not only bare, but torn off the wall and drug behind a pick-up as well.

Well, enough bitching. I read that you may be bringing back the mad Rox-meister himself: Alpha-killer represent! Actually, I always was fond of him and his anal-retentive ways, especially after his Lunar 2/FF VII/RE coverage. Anyone that passionate about games deserves some props. I also hope that the talked about graveyard/retro section sees a revival. Give us eBay trollers a reason to troll! I'm still trying to fill out my Saturn collection, but I wouldn't mind a few additions to my list (throw in some 16-bit imports while you're at it, please). Chuck the TV coverage if necessary; television doesn't cost money, unlike gaming. I'd much rather be informed on games/anime than what tripe is masquerading as "entertainment" today. But really, is it possible to improve on perfection? Play is still the best on the market, regardless of my "gripe." Just keep making them, and I'll keep buying them.

Mad props in your direction,
Zach L.

We received quite a bit of mail about our little foray into the minds of developers, most of it very pleased to find a mixture of new- and old-school mentalities among

them. One thing, however, remains clear: enthusiast gamers across the board are not going gently into the abyss of modern game design. They want their games hard and rewarding like the symphonies of control and stomach-butterfly-inducing games of yesteryear like Strider, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Castlevania, etc., etc. According to you, Metroid Prime most recently seemed to strike the best balance between the old school and the new, which seems the logical approach...given the ability to turn off hints and unearth more and more long after the Prime bites the big one. Speaking with developers, they hear the gamers loud and clear; in fact, they themselves came up with the same games. They're aware that finding a way to stay true to gaming's roots while pleasing the recent legions of pop-culture-ites is going to be a tall order. The trick in the future will definitely be holding the core gamer's interest while trying to appease the new—those masses that we believe may get off this ride someday when the next big thing comes along. If the enthusiast ranks dwindle for lack of old school challenges and control, the preservation of the industry is not assured, that much we firmly believe. Shifting gears, we're on the retro thing in a big way. It's coming soon, promise.

Sign of the times...

My primary reason for writing is to ask for some help obtaining artwork or production art for the game Rez. I've been wanting to get a tattoo that embodied my feelings for gaming and I would like to get a tattoo of Eden from Rez. It would represent my gaming opinion well with the whole gaming/Sega/artistic/bad ass f-----g game theme. So if there is any way you could send me some character art of Eden in the form of email or snail mail or possibly directing me to someone or somewhere I could obtain said artwork it would be greatly appreciated. If you are able to, I would be willing to photograph the whole experience and send the photos to you. Which leads to the question, are there a lot of people out there doing this sort of thing? if so, would you guys be interested in doing an article on it? Or perhaps a section in the mag on gaming/gamers lifestyle...we all seem to be pretty similar. Thanks for your time.

Matt M.

You have been weighed, you have been measured, and you have been found wanting...so of course we have provided. Send us a pic of the tattoo when it's done! In fact, anyone with game tattoos...let's see 'em!

Defender

I'm a 27-year-old married gamer (yes, my wife plays too). I've been gaming since Coleco and currently own everything or just about. I work a full time graphix job not including two hours a day in travel plus a part time job (8-16 hours a week) at Electronics Boutique. Why? Quite frankly, just for shits and giggles. EB is part of my "down time." Nothing makes my day shine brighter than talking someone into buying Panzer Dragoon Orta instead of Kakuto Chojin (well...before KC was yanked). Like you, I'm there for the games and for the uninformed. If someone brings a Batman: Dark Tomorrow or an MK Advance to the counter, I let them know it's junk. And you know what? More often than not they listen! They thank me for being honest and get something else! Back in the day I wish someone had done that for me every time I brought home a skunk title. $50 is a lot of money for mommy or daddy to be laying out for little Jimmy or Jane. Often it's a kid's allowance—saved up for months at a time just to buy that one game that would have to tide them over for several more months. Does this kid deserve to be hoodwinked by some corporation that's out to make a fast buck? Should he be lied to by a supposedly unbiased review in an "official-magazine" publication that's paid to give the game a 9 when everyone else gave it a 5 or less? He sees Superman on the cover and his eyes glaze over, unaware of the horror of programming that lies beneath. The kid doesn't know any better and doesn't deserve to walk out the door with a lemon so I tell 'em. I couldn't respect myself as a gamer if I didn't. And the customers return time and time again and question me with the titles in their hands because in the end, honesty wins the day.

Sincerely,
The guy behind the counter

You're a good man. The funny thing is, we actually did a Superman cover as a test (after the developer assured us the final product would be a triple-A offering) to see if a comic book character on our cover would have mass appeal. Suffice to say I think the Man of Steel is doomed as a video game character. Dark Tomorrow, on the other hand, redefines bad. Superman SoA at least had some bragging rights (the game was good in the air, bad on the ground) but when it comes to games like DT that the company withholds from the press until after it ships, well, you're the last line of defense. Now if you could only go hang out at Best Buy, Babbages, Toys R Us, WalMart, Target...we'd all be safe! As one of the few people who liked Kakuto Chojin by the way, for the sheer look and sound of it all, I think games of its ilk would be better served at the $20 mark. They're not so much "bad" as they are short and in need of depth. At retail do you find those 20-buck games flying off the shelves? We hear they do. Write us back and let us know. As critics, we need to take into account what games cost, and I find myself losing sight of that once in a while. Letters like yours keep us in check.

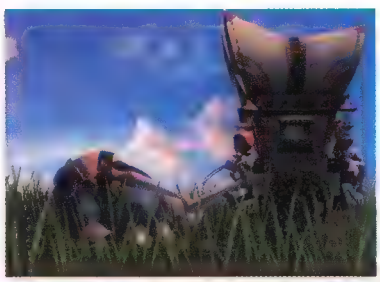
Just like old times

You knew it would happen eventually: Nintendo and Square come together again as role-playing disciples reflect on a return of the old 16-bit magic. But did you ever imagine it would be in the light of such a different industry? Now that they're officially Square Enix Co., Ltd., the intimidating RPG giant has even more potential to its reach, forging three huge titles by the end of this year.

To no surprise, Final Fantasy will continue its legacy, crafted as an exclusive for GameCube. Called Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles, the game is being aggressively tied in to the Game Boy Advance, allowing up to four players to use the handhelds as a way to link to the game's world and communicate intimately with party members, solve puzzles, utilize magic and cut strategic deals. Through a special interface, you'll be able to use the GBA as a controller, downloading private information during the quest.

Returning to the deeply strategic appeal of Final Fantasy Tactics for the handheld, FF Tactics Advance captures flawlessly the addiction and intrigue of the PlayStation classic. In less than two months, the game has already sold almost 500,000 units in Japan, a proper indication of the exhaustive addiction the game holds, especially as a handheld.

Also for the GBA is the 2D-grounded Sword of Mana, an action-RPG that recalls the old-school spirit and sensibility of Seiken Densetsu. The adventure is huge, leading to several moments where you must make careful choices that will impact the friends you make and the path you ultimately follow.



The games show a return to the whimsy of FFVII and IX. And check out that new logo...

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Good for the Soul: Namco Spawns McFarlane

Namco Ltd. and Todd McFarlane Productions have announced a mutually beneficial business deal in which the two will cross-license characters for the upcoming Namco-developed Spawn game and TMP's Soul Calibur II action figure line. Following on the heels of a similar deal with Konami, who is developing a game based on McFarlane's Monsters, it looks like Todd may be taking his eye off the baseball for a while and delving further into the video-game realm, where so far he's only dabbled.

The game (working title: Spawn) is a mission-based action-adventure set in a not-so-distant-future New York City and will utilize a control set made up of acrobatic jumps, double jumps, glides and climbing – along with a combo-based hand-to-hand engine that will allow players full access to Spawn's arsenal of hellish abilities.

Soul Calibur II producer Hiroaki Yotoriyama, who worked with Todd creating the character Necrid: "When developing Soul Calibur II, I was working not just on making the game interesting, I was concerned about the storyline and character design... How could I bring alive 16th century warriors who bet their life and all their possessions for a moment of glory? Doing that was difficult and the most exciting part of the job. In that process, the opportunity to collaborate with Todd McFarlane on Necrid was key in enhancing the level of the product. As a fellow creator, I feel great pride in the creation of a new character that was developed by the world's greatest creator. In the Xbox version of Soul Calibur II, Todd McFarlane's Spawn will also appear. I'm confident that using cutting-edge technologies from Namco such as CG modeling, motion, sound and character manipulation, along with focusing on the original images in the comic books, will bring Spawn to life as he should be. I am also really pleased with the 3D modeling for the Soul Calibur II action figures, which have brought this art to its highest form. Being a part of the extremely organic collaboration with Todd McFarlane, which has shown through in Soul Calibur II, has been a true honor. I don't know if I can wait for the Spawn video game that's currently under development in the US. It should be something really special."

I think we can all agree that similar unions are needed to "spawn" game toys that do their respective properties justice.

True Crime: Streets of LA Casting

Continuing to blur the line between Hollywood and video games, Activision threw a party in LA earlier this month to announce the cast for its new action adventure, True Crime: Streets of LA. Taking inspiration from Hong Kong action movies and American crime dramas, players take on the role of Nick Kang, an ex-cop with a massive chip on his shoulder who has a personal vendetta with the LA underground. Blending together various gameplay genres including driving, car chases, foot pursuits, shootouts and, of course, hand-to-hand combat, from what we've seen, True Crime could give Grand Theft Auto a run for its money. And with a game world filled with gangsters, mob bosses and crooked cops, having the right voice to go along with a character is a crucial element.

"We really wanted to bring a Hollywood feel to our big time action-movie/Hong Kong cinema script," explains Chris Archer, Executive Producer for True Crime, "and the actors we chose made the story seem better than we could have expected." After checking out the game in action (and hearing the various celebrity voiceovers), we couldn't help but get excited about it. The voices truly made it a more cinematic experience. "We actually created a list of actors the characters in our script reminded us of," continues Archer. "Keep in mind that when writing you are always inspired by a particular character you may have seen on TV or in film. Once we had our wish list, we approached the actors we had in mind and the great thing about it was that every actor we worked with was at the top of our list. We never dreamed we could actually put together the ensemble that we did."

So exactly how involved were they with True Crime? The list puts Grand Theft Auto: Vice City to shame. "Russell Wong, Gary Oldman, Michelle Rodriguez and Michael Madsen were really into their characters," concludes Archer. "Many of the actors thought the game was great and really wanted to be involved. Although some of them are not gamers themselves, they have children that are, which made them think, How cool are you if your parent is not only a famous actor, but his or her voice is in a video game?"

What a cast!

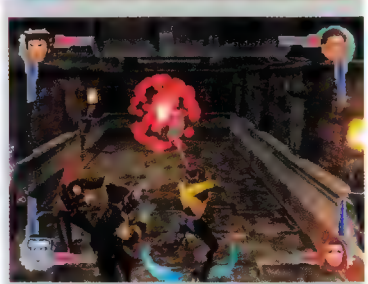
Clockwise from top left: Christopher Walken (George), Gary Oldman (Agent Masterson, Rocky), Michelle Rodriguez (Rosie Velasco), Ron Perlman (Misha), Michael Madsen (Don Rafferty), Russell Wong (Nick Kang), Mako (General Kim), James Hong (Ancient Wu)

Tron's got legs

Rebecca Romijn Stamos has signed on as the voice of Mercury for TRON 2.0, the stunning new first-person action game developed by Monolith, scheduled for release this August 26 on PC (and hopefully console thereafter). Rebecca will be heating up the game grid as the undefeated champion light-cycle racer (residual Rollerball memory commencing...shutting down) who teams up with Jet Bradley to combat corruption in the computer world. In the game, Mercury is a fearless AI stream or "Game Bot" created by an unknown user to help Jet navigate the dangers of the virtual world, so while players navigate the 30-odd levels of the game, Rebecca will be whispering sweet nothings in their ears, "de-rezzing" Datawraiths, Seekers, and Z-Lots headed in your direction. We're all ears.

Mutation Nation

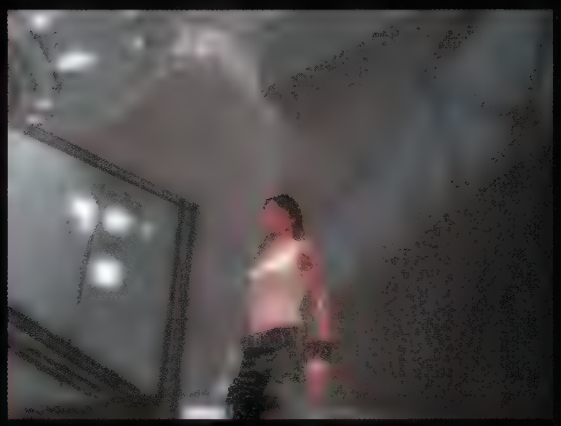
Because there's no such thing as too much of a good thing, Activision has announced the first X-Men role-playing game for the GameCube, Xbox and PS2, being developed by Raven Software for release in 2004. The real-time squad-based action-RPG will let players control it all with the ability to assemble, train and lead their own X-Men fighting force—drawing from 15 of the most popular characters over the last 40 years, like Wolverine, Cyclops, Storm, Nightcrawler, Colossus, Gambit, and Beast—to do battle with an array of foes from the Marvel Universe including Morlocks, the Brotherhood of Mutants and robotic Sentinels. Sounds like Brute Force with X-Men, which could be good; there's even a four-player co-op mode in the works, allowing additional players to join in at any time. The story is being penned by Man of Action, a studio of comic book industry veterans, and begins with the rescue of a young mutant in a plot with implications leading to the uniting of mutants at the expense of humankind.



Sega gets busy

The last thing we expected from Sega was for them to resurrect Vectorman, the Blue Sky-developed Genesis game that knocked the 16-bit world on its ear with stunning special effects and manic transforming gameplay—but they have...and it's due out in early 2004. Turning its 2D roots to 3D third-person action and shooting, Pseudo Interactive have their work cut out for them. This time out, the modular robotic soldier will set out on a quest to rescue Gamma 6 from the evil Orbot, Volt. Like the 16-bit man of many vectors, Vectorman will be interchangeable and upgradeable to the tune of 15 weapons and 25 upgrades. The proof will be in the advanced physics engine, though, which gives the vastly destructible and fully interactive environs an active role in the game as Vectorman ducks behind crumbled pillars and uses the environment to forge ahead. The AI is also said to be exemplary and the world "living."

Perhaps more surprising, however, was the announcement of a sequel to Headhunter (one of the most underrated games in a long time), the 2000 Dreamcast/PS2 title that likely under-performed due to its Acclaim pedigree, when indeed it was a first-party Sega creation. Headhunter: Redemption takes place 20 years after the devastation of the Bloody Mary Virus, within a divided world of dual realities: "Above" and "Below." Above is a glittering metropolis of glass and steel towers controlled by media and powerful corporations, while Below lie subterranean colonies, home to criminals and misfits sent underground to work in exchange for their lives by the society. Er, okay…just add "all restaurants are Taco Bell" and you've got Demolition Man. I'm getting joy-joy feelings just thinking about it. Sega VP of marketing Mike Fischer said, "Headhunter: Redemption is definitely a glimpse at the darker side of Sega." Sounds like the perfect time to re-introduce Mystic Defender and ESWAT ... Among Sega's many other new game announcements the most exciting are Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg (see last months Ink) Altered Beast; the very long awaited sequel to the Genesis classic (for PS2) Phantasy Star Online III: C.A.R.D. Revolution; the continuation of PSO with an all new turn based card system (GameCube) Dororo; a modern day action epic adapted from the legendary Osamu Tezuka anime/manga - Astro Boy (PS2) and Sonic Heroes; Sonic's PS2 and Xbox debut which allows players to control three characters simultaneously using Sonic's speed, Knuckle's power, and Tail's flying (GC, PS2, Xbox). Sega also announced Virtual On Marz (PS2) Konoichi (PS2) Sonic Battle (GBA) Sonic Pinball Party (GBA), Otogi (Xbox) Sega GT Online (Xbox) VF 4 Evolution (PS2) and a ton of new sports stuff. We'll have the full scoop on them all in next month's E3 report.



Clockwise from top left: Headhunter: Redemption, Vectorman, Phantasy Star Online Episode III C.A.R.D. Revolution

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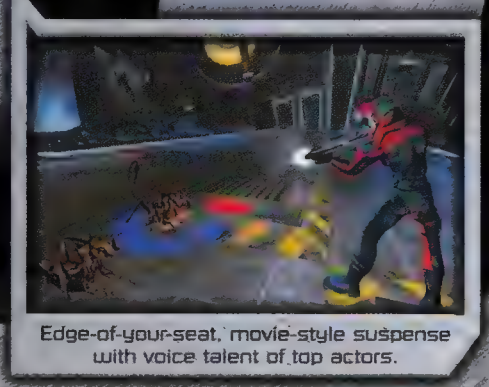

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MATURE M — Blood and Gore, Violence, Strong Language — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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Command and conquer

Brute Force

words brady fiechter

You wantonly round the corner without much regard for that mutant sniper who's deviously perched in one of the shadowy corners of an enormous, ancient rock structure. A few errant shots alert you of the error of your overly anxious actions; a few hit the mark. Back you go for protective cover, reassessing the situation. It's getting worse: a swell of ground troops are mingling in a basin below, where you watch from vertiginous heights on the winding path above. There's a pipe running to an entrance point across the distant ledge, but going in now to disarm the camp below before they take an offensive is potential suicide.

By now you've assembled your team of four commandos: the irascible Tex, who wants nothing more than to blow stuff up; the sneaky Hawk, who is never one to lose her cool; the mutant Brutus, a passionate and determined warrior with a grounded spirituality; and the professional Flint, a meticulous killer whose sexy chill crackles with a delight in her dubious craft. Through the strategic teamwork of this uniquely capable squad of clones, the situation can be tackled in a number ways, and you're the general who must manage the mini-army's individual strengths and weakness. It's Hawk who inevitable gets the call, activating her cloaking device that lasts just long enough for her to surreptitiously infiltrate the enemy below, slicing them with her energy blade for clean

elimination. Flint is the sniper of the bunch, and it seems the obvious call to send her to a safe point, where she can deal with the pesky mutant still waiting from afar.

Pop. You see the mutant through your scope tumble over the ledge, hundreds of feet below to the ground. The view is intense, the world expanse intimidating and enormous. One more mutant down, countless enemies to go. In this game of ceaseless action called Brute Force, the intensity level begins on high and continues to redline, and this treacherous area you're trying to secure is just the beginning. So far you've been smart with your approach, constantly cycling through your squad members, ordering them to provide cover fire, stand their ground and move into key positions.

Amidst the chaos and increasingly brutal strength of the enemy, mistakes do occur, and this time you've just made a big one. Pushing forward, you order Tex on ahead to fire at will as you take command of Brutus, calling on his ability to regenerate health and view the area with hypersenses. Oops. Looks like Tex, MK-Assault rifle in one hand, a retrieved regenerator in the other, is stirring up insurmountable trouble up ahead and, even better, there's the outline of a soldier behind a tent, running towards an injured Hawk, who you neglected to heal in the aftermath of her storming the camp and is effortlessly shredded by a molotov cocktail.

The mission continues on with three members, more difficult than ever, but not before you retrieve Hawk's floating memory chip for future re-cloning. She'll be back, after the job is done here. In the science fiction reality of Brute Force, combat is tidy and safe, thanks to the Confederation's reliance on creating super soldiers who can do the work of hundreds without the messy PR consequences. These guys fight with the spirit of traditional soldiers—they're just not the original model. Reluctant but determined, the team has been assembled to thwart war factions, supplant terrorist groups, to pretty much maintain the controlled power and security of those who created them. As an action-heavy tactical shooter with a good deal of exploration, Brute Force is a success, but the development of these manufactured soldiers within the structure of the backstory maintains an important place.

Digital Anvil, the gamemakers behind this involving campaign of virtual wartime reality, have pressed long and hard to enhance Brute Force from many angles. Producer Erin Roberts details the process and its intended outcome:

Interview

Brute Force Producer Erin Roberts

play: I was expecting more of a strategy, tactical-based shooter. What I got instead had more of an action-based, first-person-shooter-like feel. How would you describe Brute Force?
Erin Roberts: Going all the way back, when we first started the game, we were actually making a PC game, and [then Microsoft approached us] and thought Brute Force would be a perfect game for the Xbox. So as we moved to the console, then we obviously redesigned what we were aiming for. And on the PC, it was more tactical and less combat, but as we moved to the console, we felt like we needed more action, but we still wanted to retain some of the tactical elements. It eventually reached the extent where we pushed it to the max of what you can get for third-person action right now.

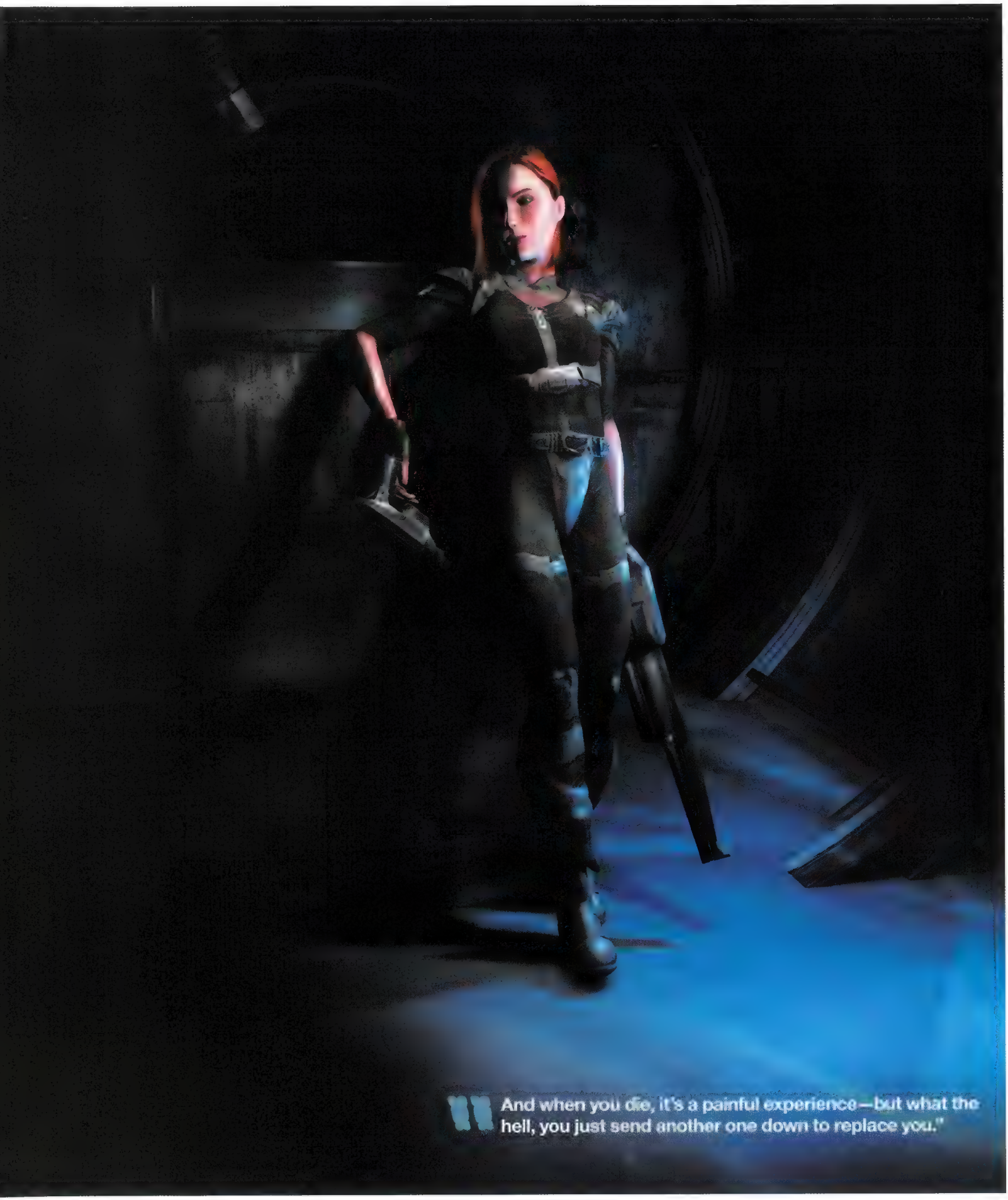
I'm a big FPS fan, and the game has that same energy and swift pacing. The idea of more action has always appealed to me.
The first thing we wanted was to show the character so you could see all the cool stuff they're doing and give them personality. There had to be some compromises: to get the speed and stuff right, you slightly have to disconnect the characters from the ground in some way. To be fast action, when you move the stick you want the character to respond. Now if you have too many animations in there or animations that don't react fast enough, it gets really annoying and really slow—like turning, not reacting fast enough. In the end, before, we had the animations control the movement, and that's where we were last E3, so things felt slightly slow. From E3 till now, and especially these last six months, when we took the extra time to really get it much more faster and fun, we disconnected it a bit. You still have cool animations, you still have personality of the character there, but now the characters react much faster. They are connected to the terrain, and you can see they move left/right really fast; you just have to remove a slight bit of realism and movement to get the fun gameplay.

Are you guys pretty much done balancing and tweaking the gameplay?
There are some more tweaks. Speed-wise, not so much. We have tweaked some of the bad guys, having them move a bit faster and surprise you and do some more things. But mostly, we've done a lot more weapons balance...

Right now each character can hold two weapons at once, right?
We wanted the characters to have a short-range and a long-range weapon. And we wanted Tex to carry two big cannons!

Is Tex considered the lead, or is he pretty much equal to the others?
We wanted the characters to have their own unique personalities. With Tex, he's not really a pain in the ass or anything, but he's been through a lot. He's been cloned countless times, he's been misused, he doesn't really trust authority that much. He's kind of finicky sometimes with that stuff. He's the old gun-toting cowboy. He's not quite sure about [the idea of] women going into combat. But obviously as he goes forward, he realizes that they're badass as well, they've got their skills. So he warms to the whole thing.

Can you talk a bit about the cloning aspect a bit? How that plays in, not so much with the story, but the involvement with the gameplay. You don't really die...well, I guess you die, but it's cool how you can retrieve your partner's memory chip for regeneration.
We really wanted to have a way where... It's almost like cloning sharks. You're these soldiers, the best the confederation has. They don't have to train more, just make more clones of you. And when you die, it's a painful experience—but what the hell, you just send another one down

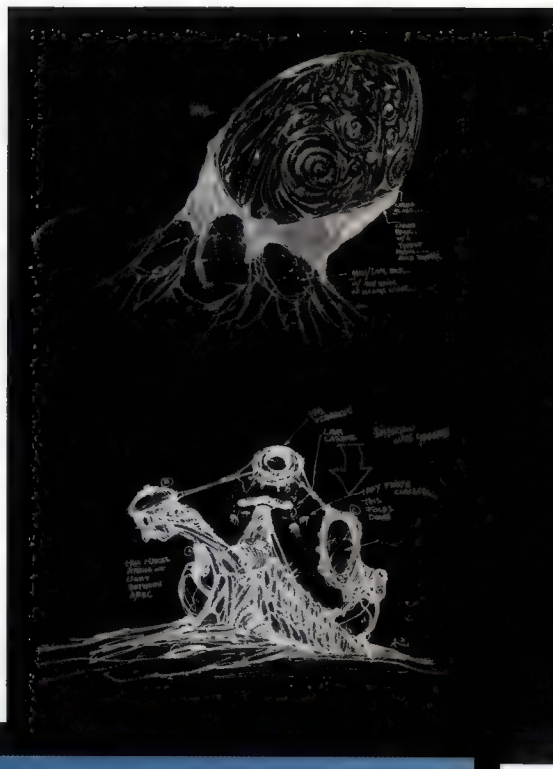

"And when you die, it's a painful experience—but what the hell, you just send another one down to replace you."

to replace you... The cloning thing came from an early idea where we just really wanted to have a way to replace the characters and also fit it well within the fiction. Rather than just going with "You Have Three Lives"—no, you're actually getting cloned, and the process costs money. And if you want to get, like, the high score and open any big Easter egg stuff we have, then you have to go through the entire game without losing a life, that sort of thing.

You don't necessarily need to complete every objective, right?
As long as you complete the primary objectives, you can move along to the next mission. But you won't get the higher score and you lose the incentives there. The idea is that you can play exactly the way you want. If you're the type of person that wants to get in there with three of your friends on system link, and you want to blaze through and keep on blowing things up and cloning and keep running through, that's fine. However, some of the most fun experiences are when you sit down with your friends and go, "Alright, we are not going to lose a character. If we lose a character, then we have to start over from the last save point."

Yeah, that's how I like playing the game.
We've been playing a lot lately, just with the guys here. And it's amazing, when you really care about the character, you don't want them killed and you don't want to clone them. And you start playing the character properly, you start playing Hawk—she goes and scouts ahead, backstabs someone. And you get the sniper to take guys out. Using the big gun guy, you lay down suppression fire to support the girls and so forth. It really comes into its own at that point; you really feel like you're moving as a team. It's a hell of a lot of fun.

With that team aspect, having the squad members all work together. Was that the focus from the start?
Absolutely. That was really the core thing we started with. But once again, there was a lot of talk in the early days, are we going to allow people to restart wherever, making them restart something when they die? Maybe in PC gaming you can do that sort of thing, but on console I think you have to give people a choice. If people want to re-clone and keep on going from where they are, let those people do it. But others are going to want to try and get the high score, they're going to want to keep the guys alive. So let those people do what they want as well. But the concept originally was: keep these guys alive and they do their stuff, and you mess up and they get killed, then you have to start again. We just thought about that for a while and said, "Wait a second: we should let the player have the choice. It's the player's game, they just paid 50 dollars for this game, if they want to re-clone and keep on going, then let them do that." But if people want to go through and keep the guys alive, then we'll let them do



Screw up and that horn's gonna be blasting for all to hear. At least you have support

> **"The story is really about the squad and how they get along and how they grow together."**

that as well.

You've talked about the personality and the connection with the characters. There's a lot of story and a lot of chatter between the characters. Story and theme do play a part in the experience of the game.
Absolutely. The story is really about the squad and how they get along and how they grow together, as well as the overarching points—send someone in to solve one problem and things start cycling and getting worse, spinning out of control, and up towards where there is a big finale. But yeah, there's really a story in there, as well as the going down and having a cool tactical experience, a cool shooting experience.

Part of the support are those cutscenes, the CG. Did you ever debate going real time in-game as opposed to the CG?
It all came down to a question of timing and the resources available to us. Actually it used to all be in-game. But the problem was that the tool we were using for the in-game stuff just really wouldn't let us work as well as when we were in Maya, in terms of camera angles, in terms of lighting and other stuff. And we just basically…with so many different things to concentrate on, we ran out of time working on the editor for this sort of thing. This is one of the calls we made back when we were delaying the game, apart from getting system link in and all the different features back in September, and we made the call to take what I thought were the [best components], so a part of the art and animation crew went and created all the briefings and a bunch more we didn't have, all in Maya. So we put it in and created a better visual experience.

Can you talk about the AI in the game? Maybe some cool ways the enemies react or are introduced into the action?
Oh, there's so much.

Yeah, just anything that pops into your head, something you're most proud of, maybe what the player might enjoy the most.
One of the big things we have, and there's great emphasis later on, is where, say, guys will jump out of the ceiling in front of you, or off ledges down towards you. The whole idea, like the guys jumping out of the water and attacking you…we wanted different ways to [engage you]. At one point you can go through with Flint and do a lot of sniping from afar and so forth. We've really tried to balance and counterbalance. We wanted areas where if all the character is doing is wandering through, sniping, and all the sudden two guys jump out and are right there in your face, you have to defend yourself. It makes the tactical experience so much more fun.

Just touching on the general AI, which we've built for the squad and the enemies, we really wanted the characters to react much more realistically. I think you'll notice when enemies are coming towards you, they won't just run at you most the time, you'll see them go from cover point to cover point. They'll run behind a rock, jump out and shoot you, roll back to the rock, run to another cover point. The same goes for your squad. They won't just stand in the open getting hurt. If you put them into the action mode to go into battle, you'll see them get down on their knees, ready to fight. We wanted to make it feel like it is a believable experience; you're a squad of badasses going into combat. As for the enemy, rather than just running up to shoot, he'll jump out of the way of grenades, roll behind cover. If he sees you go behind the rock and you don't come out for a certain amount of time, the enemy will actually throw a grenade over the rock to try and flush you out. It's just cool, stuff like that. I was watching one of the guys play, and he was behind a rock thinking he was safe. And suddenly this molotov cocktail from a mutant came flying over and just blew him up. We were all laughing at [his reaction.]

You were saying you might play the game in a way where you play a favorite character, you want to protect it and get through without cloning once. Can you play the game with one character and make it through? Or do you still have to manage all your squad, rotating back and forth for certain advantages in certain situations?
I think it depends on how good you are. I think in standard mode, if you're really good, you can probably take one guy and just about get through. Maybe not the later missions, but certainly through the first half of the game—if you're

really good, shooting and staying back. But the better you use the squad, the more points you'll get, and the better it will go for you.

And it's just more fun, too. To me it's just so much more rewarding when you use the squad members to their full advantage.
Absolutely. Especially when you put them in their modes, you move them to where you want them, and you move Flint to the high ground so she can support you, keep fire over your head. Then you've got the different levels. I don't know if you're playing on standard, hard or brutal, but when you start moving up those levels, it's amazing how much more tactical you need to be. If you play running through and shooting stuff, in standard you can sort of get away with it. But if you try that in hard, or especially in brutal—which is *brutal*—it's much more tactical, it's much more thought out, like, "Ok, I'm going to send Hawk out to find out where the bad guys are. Now I know where to snipe this guy here." Then you can play it and get through the easy modes. But you really do need to go play it back when you think you're really good, on a much harder level. It's actually a very different game experience.

What's it like balancing all the AI? Instead of one main character you've got four, and I'm assuming you don't want the team members to take over and make it too easy. Must have been a challenge getting everything

to work.
It's definitely been a long road getting it there, and just really getting the AI code in place. Everything's been in place for about a year now. It's been 12 months of just tweaking and tweaking and tweaking, and balancing. We have graphs of missions, damage points people take, damage weapons do. We have equations to work out... It's almost frightening. I feel like I'm back in math class. But that's the kind of stuff you really have to do to balance it all. You can't afford to have one mission easy, and the next one ridiculously hard, and then the next one easy again. And you have to really make the characters feel balanced. And when they get more weapons—you feel more powerful, but they're not necessarily overpowering. And once again, since we pushed back the date from Christmas to now, it's given us the extra time to really put the polish on.

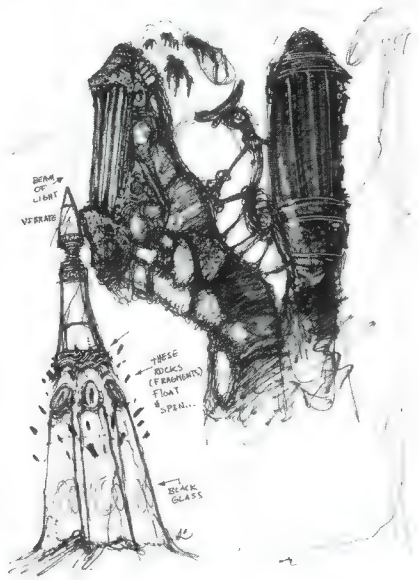
The map feature in the game is so helpful. With an action game like this, it seemed really important to have that intuitive guide so as to keep from getting lost in the huge levels.
One of the decisions which we feel really good about was delaying the game, allowing us to [hone] stuff like the map. We want the people to enjoy the game when they go through, without getting lost. We don't feel we're cheating by showing you were to go, because we're not telling what's going to happen. So putting the map in was a great way of leading the character through and also putting new objectives down there, showing new enemies down there. It was really a must. We felt in a lot of the levels you could get turned around really easily.

What have you done with the multiplayer aspect of the game?
Our number-one favorite thing is that you can get together with three of your friends for system link. You've each got a 'box, you connect it to your own TV, so you're basically playing with your own team of four, and you get to go all the way through the campaign. That's just a lot of fun. You can also do it all with one 'box, four-player split screen. Although it would probably be better just doing two players on one 'box. You can even do two boxes with four people, which is really cool. And also, you can come and go at any time. One of the things we're proud of is that I can be sitting there, playing the campaign, and a friend can come along and ask if you want some help. Basically, he just pushes start, the screen splits and he joins in. He takes over one of my AI characters, and basically, when he quits, the AI returns to his character and control goes right back to player one again. Cool thing is you don't have to stop, you don't have to reload. There's no difference between multiplayer and single-player in the campaign.

Another cool thing on the multiplayer side is the squad deathmatch. It's something people haven't seen or played or even talked about. You basically get to choose a squad each of your favorite characters. And the way you get characters in the game is that at the beginning all you can play are the four squad characters, both for deathmatch and squad deathmatch. But as you go through the game, you'll find a DNA kit. When you pick up the DNA kit during the campaign, it then opens up that person. The cool thing is that, let's say you're playing a deathmatch game, and you hook up with your pal. You might have a selection of 20 guys you can play, but your friend's only opened up two. So we set up the idea that not only are you going through and trying to max your score but also you're going through and opening cool deathmatch players. It starts out where you choose your team and as you unlock the characters you get more than one team. You have all these different combinations and ways to play.

There's a lot of appeal to the multiplayer component, but would you consider the game more tailored towards the single-player experience?
The campaign is definitely the main strength of the game. And it's where we've invested the majority of our time. But we've really put together something as well on the deathmatch side... It's come together much stronger than I could have thought, where we've managed to balance 30 different characters with different weapons and fighting different ways. And if you use your characters well, some characters who are weaker can become stronger because of their unique abilities, and when you really begin to play those characters it can become a lot of fun. Lately, we've been playing eight-player squad deathmatch, just having a great time and shouting.

Was there ever the possibility or consideration for taking the game to Xbox live?
What it came down to, and this goes back again to September, was that we said, "Look, we really need more polish time." There were features we didn't have but wanted in the game. We felt like we weren't doing the game justice if we shipped then. So we said, "We do have to get the game out in some sort of reasonable amount of time." When we sat down, there was a huge list of features we wanted to get in. What really happened was, given the other stuff we wanted—some of which we talked about before—and that we wanted to get some sort of multiplayer support, Live unfortunately didn't make the cut. We didn't really have a multiplayer layer in the code to start with. We felt we could get the system link in with the four or five months we had, but we knew there was no way we could go Live in the time we had. And if we just concentrated on Live, we miss out on a whole bunch of other features we wanted in the game. It was a really tough call for us. Obviously we felt that, yeah, Live would be cool, but at the end of the day, it just came down to that if you have Live in, you miss out on so much other good stuff. So with [system link] we decided we could give players that multiplayer aspect while still including a bunch of other big features.



Take the Shiny pill

ENTER THE MATRIX

words dave halverson

Sitting in the theater, as Trinity took that first fateful leap, I knew I was in for the ride of my life. What proceeded was a revelation of cinematic achievement that left me speechless. The Wachowski Bros. had not only managed to redefine science fiction (and cinematography to some extent), but at the same time incorporate many of the elements I love about anime into live action—a feat I never even considered possible. Leaving the theater, all I could think about was how they would ever top it and, of course, who would be blessed with the game rights. Would *The Matrix* become yet another missed opportunity in a sea of failed movie-to-game adaptations, or would the producers somehow expend the time and energy necessary to convey the magic onscreen into a video game?

The news that Shiny Entertainment got the nod was the first sign of hope (although I'm still not over the fact that Messiah never made it to console—and I miss Jim), though even the most righteous developers have been known to fold under the rigors of a mega-movie franchise. It would still take a concerted effort between the Wachowskis, Warner Bros., the actors, Infogrames and Shiny to really pull off a game worthy of the namesake. You can count the amount of times that has happened on one hand, and even then, the results have been mixed. Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers are the only two modern adaptations that had support anywhere close to Enter the Matrix, and they're relatively easy fodder for game creation in comparison.

Although countless publications have driven the convergence angle into the ground, it still bears glazing over. Concisely, Jada Pinkett Smith—who plays hovercraft pilot Niobe in Reloaded—shot more for the game than she did the film (not to mention endure rigorous motion capture, body scanning and face mapping), including a Wachowski-directed hour-long in-game movie—a sort of Matrix Gaiden, if you will—that has a direct correlation with Reloaded. All 25 of the film's core actors play some role in the game, although Niobe and Ghost (played by Anthony Wong) are the only playable characters. To think how close we were to a game starring Alliyah makes you start missing her all over again. Jada Pinkett Smith is a beautiful woman but she's married with children…fantasy sequence disengaged.

After playing enough of the game sans film footage (which was wisely excluded from preview builds in fear of plot leaks) to write this preview, but not so much as to spoil the final game, I will say this: Enter the Matrix is almost illegally fun, and anyone who compares it to Max Payne is a moron. Max Payne has bullet time, yes... simplistic, limited, bullet time. This is not bullet time in that respect. The beauty of this game's time manipulation is the symphony of player and game made possible through mastery, when it's played to exhibit its full potential. Shiny has accomplished something extraordinary with Enter the Matrix by constructing a game for any skill level player, only with nuances so deep, the more dexterity you have, the better the game becomes. Beyond dynamic difficulty, it's so aptly designed that unearthing its layers of control becomes as key as completing the levels themselves. I found myself not merely wanting to win but to look good doing it, and to me, that is a big part of what modern game design is all about.

In terms of the visual presentation, there's a measure of give and take present, although overall it's near perfection. Meticulously detailed character models, crazy reflections, swarms of enemies, and massive environments all tossing around at a steady 60 fps do come at a price. Although the settings are stunning representations of the film's locations, fine detail is somewhat limited. Computers and other ancillary items appear simplistic (should you be of the ilk to examine such things), glass doesn't shatter so hot, and garden-variety thugs lack sophisticated modeling. The trade-off—piles of rubbery bodies that crumple realistically onscreen at once—is, of course, well worth the slight lack of plausibility. I should also mention that I've only played the PS2 version. Chances are this doesn't apply to the Xbox game.

Part of the game's appeal is the ability to link moves and shoot simultaneously. Seeing a scene like this in motion is all you need to become a believer.

After all is said, done, and riddled with bullets, the only way to truly critique Enter the Matrix is with the game 100 percent buttoned up and the cutscenes intact, since for the first time, they actually do matter in the grand scheme of things, adding a great deal of value to the end product. Most of us would gladly pay $20 or more for an hour-long Wachowski-directed film alone, so getting that inside of a game by one of America's premiere studios is beyond "whoa."

The Wachowski Bros.—film pioneers of the 21st century—are poised to deliver the convergence this industry has been promising for nearly a decade; and isn't it ironic that they've chosen to do so with the pioneer of the triple-A movie game? Anyone remember Aladdin?

Since my review of Enter the Matrix won't appear until well after the game ships, I'll go out on a limb and just recommend it now. The only question in my mind is where it will fall between a 4- and 5-star review.

"...I will say this: Enter the Matrix is almost illegally fun, and anyone who compares it to Max Payne is a moron."

Above: Check the french coats on both characters realistically folding over limbs... As Brian Fellows would say, "That's crazy!"

Enter the Matrix

system: **gamecube, playstation 2, xbox** / developer: **shiny ent.** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **may**

And it's really that much better than before?

Ratchet & Clank
Going Commando

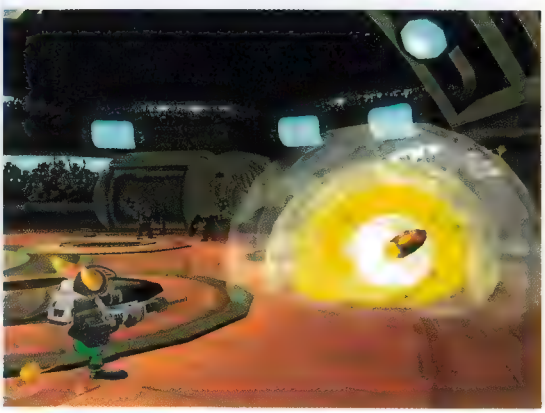
words brady fiechter

Never mind that Ratchet & Clank was one of the most innovative, technically marvelous and wildly fun games of last year. "We just weren't satisfied," says Insomniac president Ted Price. "We wanted to rethink everything."

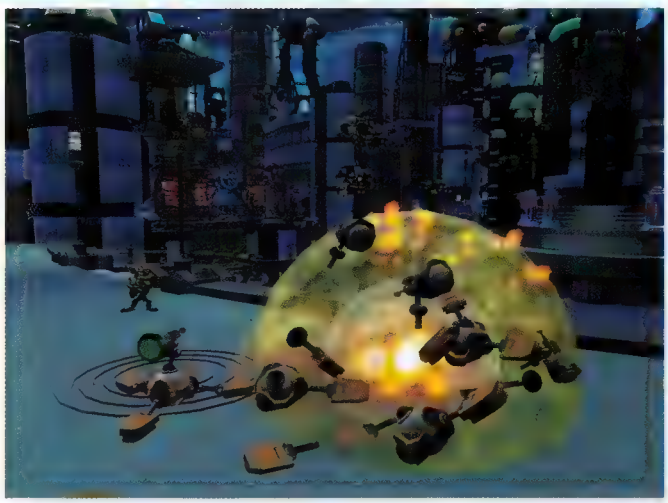
And so emerged Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando. Alterations began with the basic gameplay structure. The game is being retrofitted with more role-playing components, introducing a robust experience system that affects everything from Ratchet and Clank to their delightfully creative foes to the weapons used to promote their elimination. Story elements are also being given additional attention, fleshing out the personalities and circumstances that surround our heroes. Collecting stuff still plays a part in the progression, and the platforming elements certainly play their part, but, as Price points out, "It's not about collecting 100 percent...it's about resolving the [plights] of the characters."

It's a new galaxy and an entirely new adventure—Clank isn't even around when the game opens—and item management and combat strategy have been markedly refocused for a much more involved and satisfying experience. Ratchet can now take up to 80 points of damage, while his enemies have jumped from the max HP of 9 in the first adventure to an intimidating 120 here, resulting in a completely different approach to clearing an area, especially as the game moves past the first few levels; 5th level enemies offer more resistance than the toughest of the tough in the original R&C. The idea is to desire—and utilize—upgrades much more intensely, and find more value in incentives. And with levels nearly twice the size as before—the honed technology behind the game is extraordinary—there is just so much more to see and do. Add to all this an invaluable strafing mechanic, 19 new weapons, side games, far improved lighting effects, reshaped and personality-improved Ratchet, space combat and the joy of the gravity bomb turning into the mininuke—Insomniac deserves to be satisfied.

"...with levels nearly twice the size as before—the honed technology behind the game is extraordinary—there is just so much more to see and do."



Ratchet's newly improved look is a more natural fit within the high-tech world—which reaches beyond most anything out there



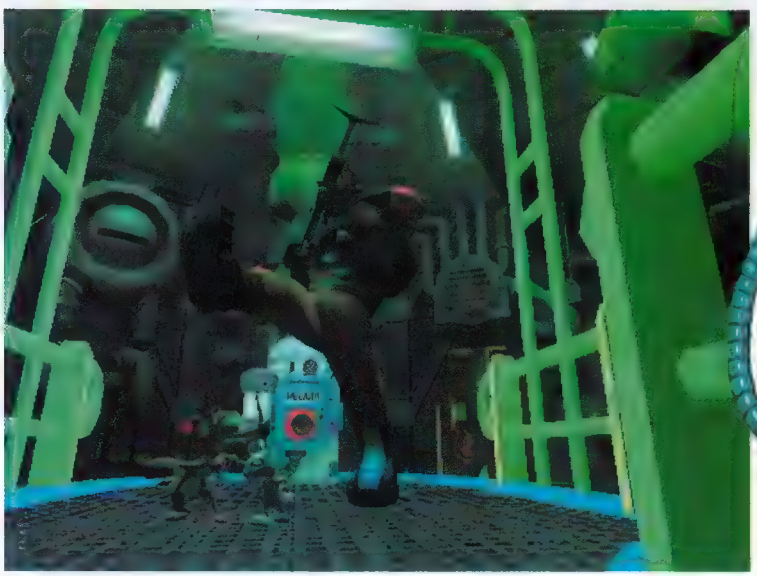
Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **insomniac games** / publisher: **sony** / available: **november**

Critters in crisis

Chain Gang

words: dave halverson



"A product of extensive electric shock testing, Spanx is a loose cannon with a crazy streak, while Redmond is a smart-ass rabbit—the victim of some unsavory cosmetic experimentation."

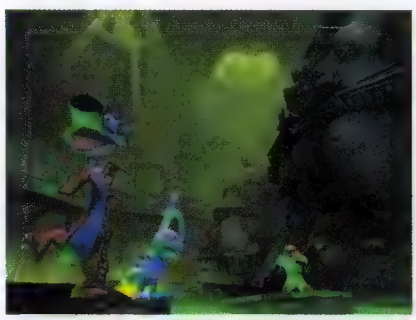
It was only a matter of time before somebody woke up and sniffed the road kill on this one—major props go out to Crystal Dynamics for being the first. In an industry filled with critter games, it's a wonder this little brainstorm took so long to brew, but here it is: the first video game about animals escaping from an evil animal-product-testing corporation.

Our two animal fugitives—Spanx and Redmond, bound by chains—are completely different animals, setting the stage for action and debauchery as they attempt to escape the genetic research labs, toxic sewers and plush executive offices of said Evil Corporation and bring the place to its knees in the process.

A product of extensive electric shock testing, Spanx is a loose cannon with a crazy streak, while Redmond is a smart-ass rabbit—the victim of some unsavory cosmetic experimentation. Together they comb the innards of the place, freeing other captives while doing battle against giant syringe-toting doctors, unsanitary surgeons, crooked rent-a-cops, vicious guard dogs and, of course, the corrupt and ruthless CEO. As you can imagine, this lends itself to all manner of action, stealth, puzzle-solving goodness and mucho humor. It's like a massive Habitrail where the player triggers a chain of unscripted events. And what's more fun than frolicking in toxic waste and busting the balls of products bound for tomorrow's infomercials...especially when you're a mutated critter with an axe to grind? By the way, is it just me, or does Spanx look familiar?

Aside from the promising premise, it's been since Knuckles Chaotix (for the ill-fated 32X) that anyone has chained together two vermin to work in tandem, and this game certainly looks to take the mechanic to soaring new heights. Spanx uses Redmond for helicoptering (which isn't a word—I checked) to and from lofty and/or otherwise inaccessible places, as a grappling hook to swing over hazards, to whip attackers, and for special defensive moves like the Hare Clog (clog a toilet with him to create a foul smell to ward off enemies), the Flaming Fur Ball or the Toxic Bunny. And when they're not clogging toilets or setting themselves on fire, they use stealth to knock out security cameras, sneak around laser sensors and generally avoid detection...and from the looks of it, there's plenty of platforming in here too. Crystal Dynamics seem to be back to their old ways, innovating and creating sequel-worthy new content.

Eidos will need choice chops to pull off the voices, but otherwise it looks like it's all systems go for a company in dire need of some lighthearted fare. Since blowing the Herdy Gerdy op, they've been churning out some pretty serious stuff, so Chain Gang is a welcome sight indeed. Perhaps Gex and another real Core game aren't too far behind, like Chuck Rock or maybe Wonderdog...yeah right, who am I kidding?!

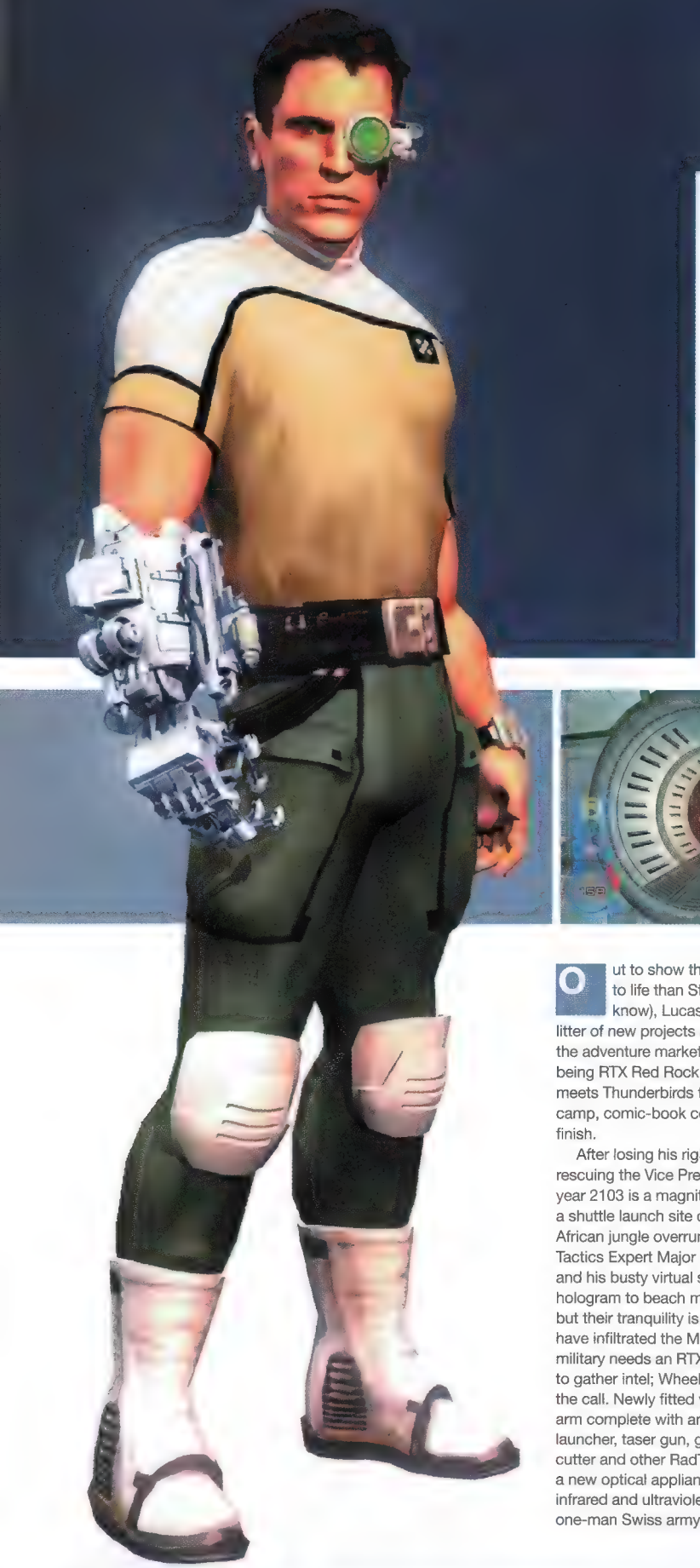


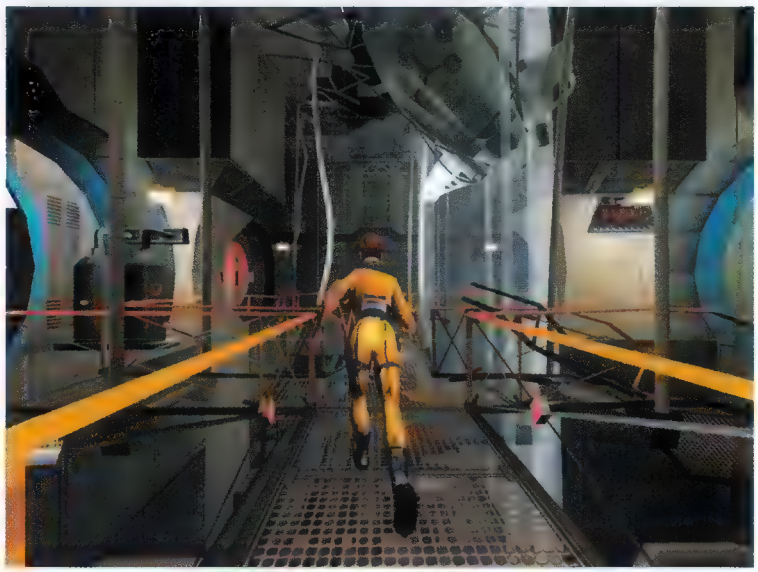
Chain Gang (working title)

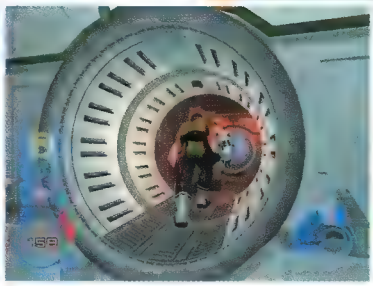
system: **playstation 2, xbox** / developer: crystal dynamics / publisher: **eidos** / available: **fall**

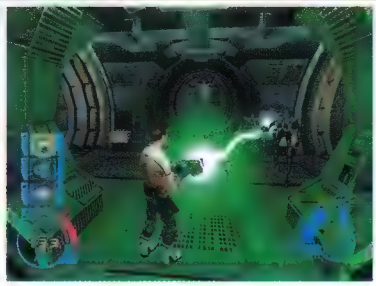
RTX Red Rock

words dave halverson









Out to show the world there's more to life than Star Wars (there is, you know), Lucas Arts has spawned a litter of new projects aimed specifically at the adventure market, the most promising being RTX Red Rock, a sort of Max Steele meets Thunderbirds that incorporates '60s camp, comic-book cool and a deep-space finish.

After losing his right arm and left eye rescuing the Vice President (who in the year 2103 is a magnitude-10 hotty) from a shuttle launch site deep in the South African jungle overrun by aliens, Radical Tactics Expert Major Eugene Zeno Wheeler and his busty virtual sidekick IRIS set the hologram to beach mode for a little R&R... but their tranquility is short-lived. The aliens have infiltrated the Mars colony and the military needs an RTX with alien experience to gather intel; Wheeler, of course, gets the call. Newly fitted with a synthetic arm complete with an onboard grenade launcher, taser gun, grappling hook, plasma cutter and other RadTac tools, along with a new optical appliance equipped with infrared and ultraviolet spectrums, he's a one-man Swiss army knife ready, willing and able to kick some alien buttocks.

Beginning your assault bouncing around in the game's zero-gravity outer region—performing standard maneuvers and some light tactical shooting as you negotiate the peaks and valleys of the red planet—you soon make your way to the game's steely interior where the game is obviously meant to excel. The close-quarters combat, exploration and puzzle solving is handled extremely well, from the camera work to Wheeler's bodily enhancements. Thermo-Scan lets you peer through walls, Navi-Scan brings up maps, and Electro and Bio Scan help identify electronics and life forms. Wheeler can also commandeer droids, rovers and alien spacecraft.

The end product is a unique-looking and -feeling adventure hybrid that, depending on the final tweaking stages, will either mildly entertain or downright thrill as the usual suspects rear their ugly heads, namely frame rate, collision miscues, and unstable enemy AI. If the cool advertisement and the Dark Horse comic are any indication, RTX Red Rock could prove to be the best original work from LucasArts in a good long time.

"After losing his right arm and left eye rescuing the Vice President (who in the year 2103 is a magnitude-10 hotty) ..."

RTX Red Rock

system: playstation 2 / developer: lucas arts / publisher: lucas arts / available: may

Time to get your bounty the hard way

Crimson Skies

High Road to Revenge

words brady fiechter

Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge has been circulating in the Where Did It Disappear To? category for the past year, recently showing itself again with a redirected feel and gameplay structure. Its heritage stems from the PC Crimson Skies, a flight action/adventure game that drew much more from a rigid simulation approach to its design. This Xbox game maintains a number of similarities from the PC original, holding on to the stronger aspects while focusing on what a console gamer (me) especially desires. The result is an extremely welcome addition to a genre that is in huge need of support.

With the adventure and action approach supplanting the tedious demands of simulated flight, Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge is rewarding the moment you jump into one of the generously armed airplanes and start unloading on the pirates and smugglers who pollute the active skies. In this pulp-fictional place not unlike something you might see in an Indiana Jones adventure, America has been depleted of its resources and drive by a Great Depression, forced to departmentalize its commerce and law into factions and fractured states. Restrictions and taxes have bogged down travel and trade, forcing rogue bands to take to the air with unscrupulous intentions.

You're ultimately part of the struggle to survive the conditions as a down-on-his luck pirate who's lost his plane in a round of poker. No problem; there's still ways of getting a hold of cool ships with which to destroy everything you see and earn more money and better ships and weapons with which to destroy everything you see with greater efficiency and satisfaction. A novice can pick the game up and enjoy the intense dogfights instantly; someone wanting more control and precision can learn the nuances of each ship and utilize the more advanced controls that are also available.

Out of its retooling stage, Crimson Skies has become more of an adventure game, with less linearity driving the missions and a greater freedom of choice for objectives. Four general areas contain several sets of smaller missions, and you aren't always locked into a single solution for each task. At times, you can even exit your plane and find other ways of moving forward: jump inside an AA turret, for example, and you can wipe out a squadron in seconds, or, even more rewarding, pick apart giant threats like a zeppelin, which disintegrates, awesomely, in a rain of shrapnel.

The immediate impact of Crimson Skies' giant setting is impressive, but beyond the sophistication lies nice little details that become strongly apparent the deeper you play—the gorgeous cloud layers, the expended shell casings, the intricate collapse of downed objects. Bringing all this to Xbox Live where up to 16 players can join in the combat is the final touch on what has emerged, finally, as an exceptional flight-combat game of a truly unique kind.

"The result is an extremely welcome addition to a genre that is in huge need of support."

Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge

system: **xbox** / developer: **fasa studios** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **june**

Better than X-pected

Freestyle MetalX

words dave halverson

"Midway has taken the time necessary to make the bikes and riders look and feel exactly as they should: slightly exaggerated versions of the real thing."

We've seen the formula applied to surfing, Razor Scooters, BMX and snowboarding, but no one ever thought to throw some dirt on it…until now. I'm speaking of course about the hub-based, checklist-oriented gameplay introduced by Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, which has finally (in my opinion) been toppled. In case you hadn't noticed, Midway have been churning out some quality games of late, chipping away at the arcade port stigma left by too many Gauntlet and SF Rush ports, the disappointing Legion, and of course far too many games ending in the word Thunder. What original titles like Dr. Muto and Haven began, Freaky Fliers, MetalX and Crank the Weasel will continue.

Initially, the Freestyle MetalX concept—massive linked hubs dedicated to strictly freestyle—sounded lame. I mean, you can only jump so many gaps and do so many tricks before you start to crave some competition. But in this case, I was gladly mistaken. It works well—really well—and I'll tell you why. The team has taken the time necessary to make the bikes and riders look and feel exactly as they should: slightly exaggerated versions of the real thing. No one, mind you—no one—has been able to achieve this thus far, but Midway has done it. Stick these characters in a game like Carmichael and you'd have the quintessential MX racer. As it stands, however, it is the quintessential hub-based extreme sports game...and I'll tell you why.

Of course, you have your tricks and your modifiers; in this case, you even get a radometer, which alerts you when you've linked enough madness together to hit a super. There are also perfectly honed wheelies and stoppies, which, besides looking neat, serve to link together combos, so the control's as nuanced as you can possibly imagine. However, what really makes MetalX tick is the scripting of events (they're actually original) and how the designers have tapered the intimidation factor associated with laundry-list gaming in open environments. Rather than just turn you loose, they've littered the map with boob-a-licious hotties that each dispense the closest challenge, so you can get to it, do it, and move on. You're also allowed enough time in each hub to actually enjoy yourself. Since the game doesn't rely on a false sense of depth, like so many unreasonably timed games in the category, you get to really enjoy the immensity of it all…and large-breasted women—and is there anything better than that? It doesn't hurt that the areas themselves border on incredible (they're gigantic, and hella cool to just motor around in) or that you do it all to the likes of Motley Crüe (it's nice to know that "Kick Start My Heart" still has a place in this world), Twisted Sister, AC/DC and other such head-banging fodder, which kicks the livin' crap out of the so-called punk that seems to get mainlined into every "extreme" game on the planet. MetalX, like so many recent Midway offerings, is geared for greatness. I hope people find their way back to one of the companies that helped start it all.

Freestyle MetalX

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **midway** / publisher: **midway** / available: **july**

Screenshots taken from PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system, Xbox™ video game system and Nintendo GameCube™ gameplay.
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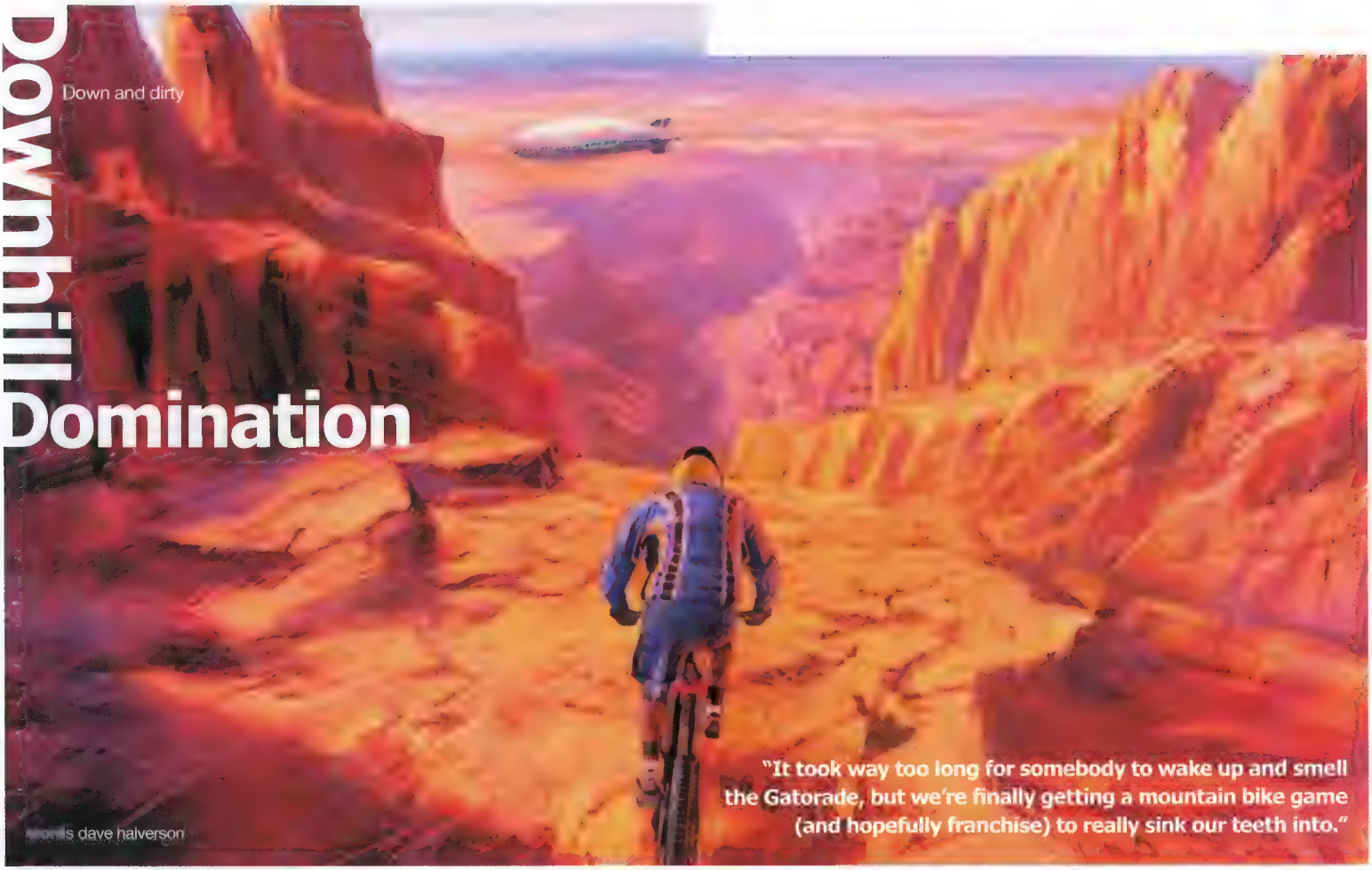
Down and dirty

Downhill Domination



"It took way too long for somebody to wake up and smell the Gatorade, but we're finally getting a mountain bike game (and hopefully franchise) to really sink our teeth into."

words dave halverson

In real life, you'd die; therein lies the beauty of video games

Road Rash

Downhill Domination

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **incog inc. ent.** / publisher: **scea** / available: **fall**

Strike a pose

P.N. 03

Product Number

words dave halverson

To put it bluntly, P.N. 03 is the stuff that action dreams are made of—pure high concept run-and-gun action injected with the hottest body in the cosmos and a fierce, smart, mechanized foe. As nimble as she is, lethal Product Number 3, Vanessa Z. Schneider, is the latest in a string of exquisite Capcom characters that ooze charisma. Like Dante, Lucia, Sieg and Arcia, Vanessa is all about finesse and offense.

The game field is one unlike any you have ever seen, switching between wind-swept desolate off-world regions and mechanized inner sanctums bathed in pure white and black that emits an eerie, plasticine, almost antiseptic vibe. Vanessa can amass and wear up to eight suits, rigged with upgradeable weapons, armor and specials, all key to survival depending on the mecha-type (or CAMS) she's up against. Cash from each mission is used in much the same fashion as Chaos Legion, giving you the opportunity to choose between upgrades or entirely new suits, providing a variable that to some extent lies with you, because you will need the proper attire. The warfare in this game is fierce—one second can mean the difference between forging ahead or death, and nearly every hall, room and corridor poses some type of tactical threat. P.N. 03 is a symphony of hit and miss: of 180s, dodging, ducking, rolling and cart-wheeling out of harm's way amidst what can only be described as intuitive shooting. Once you're plugged into it, it's virtually impossible to log out. GameCube owners truly have something to boast about—actually, make that one more thing to boast about. Next month, we're going deep into Hiroyuki Kobayashi's exciting new universe with the man himself, so stay tuned.

"To put it bluntly, P.N. 03 is the stuff that action dreams are made of—pure high concept run-and-gun action injected with the hottest body in the cosmos and a fierce, smart, mechanized foe."

If Brute Force plays as good as it looks, we're in for some sleepless nights

P.N. 03

system: **gamecube** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **september**

Sphinx and the Shadow of Set

Eurocom and THQ fire up the franchise machine

words dave halverson

In case you hadn't noticed, THQ is set to have the best year in its illustrious history, releasing Tak And The Power Of Juju, Alter Echo, and now Sphinx all by year's end. Having seen and played all three, I can attest that each game is the stuff that franchises are made of, but if there's an 800 lb. gorilla in their midst, it's Sphinx, developed by Eurocom using an all-new proprietary engine. All those years making Disney games and helping countless publishers bring their visions to life has obviously instilled in them a keen sense of character design and flow. Adding to that their own brand of humor and execution, the end result is a game that looks absolutely stunning and keeps you guessing every step of the way. We spoke with Mat Sneap, Director of Eurocom, to find out more about their new immortal adventure...

Interview Mat Sneap, Director of Eurocom

play: Eurocom are known predominantly for creating great games from licensed properties. Would you say Sphinx is your ultimate vision as a company?
Mat Sneap: It's certainly one of the main objectives of the company going forward, i.e. to show that we can design and develop our own characters and storylines. We just haven't been in a situation before where we could put the time and resources onto a project of this scale.

How long have you been on the project?
By the time we finish, around two and a half years.

How much other development is going on at Eurocom simultaneously?
We have five major projects running at one time and a smaller concept group.

How did you come to THQ? It certainly seems a great pairing with their strong distribution...
We'd worked with THQ on a number of smaller titles and knew a lot of staff there. We really liked their approach to working with external developers, and they showed a lot of enthusiasm at an early stage. This, combined with their vision for how they wanted to push the game, made it clear to us that THQ was the best home for Sphinx.

Do you share resources or divide into separate teams?
We share when it makes sense. It'd be crazy not to given the cost of developing games these days.

Based on what little we've seen, you are doing amazing things with the visuals and effects for this game on both the PS2 and GameCube; is this a proprietary engine?
Yes, it is.

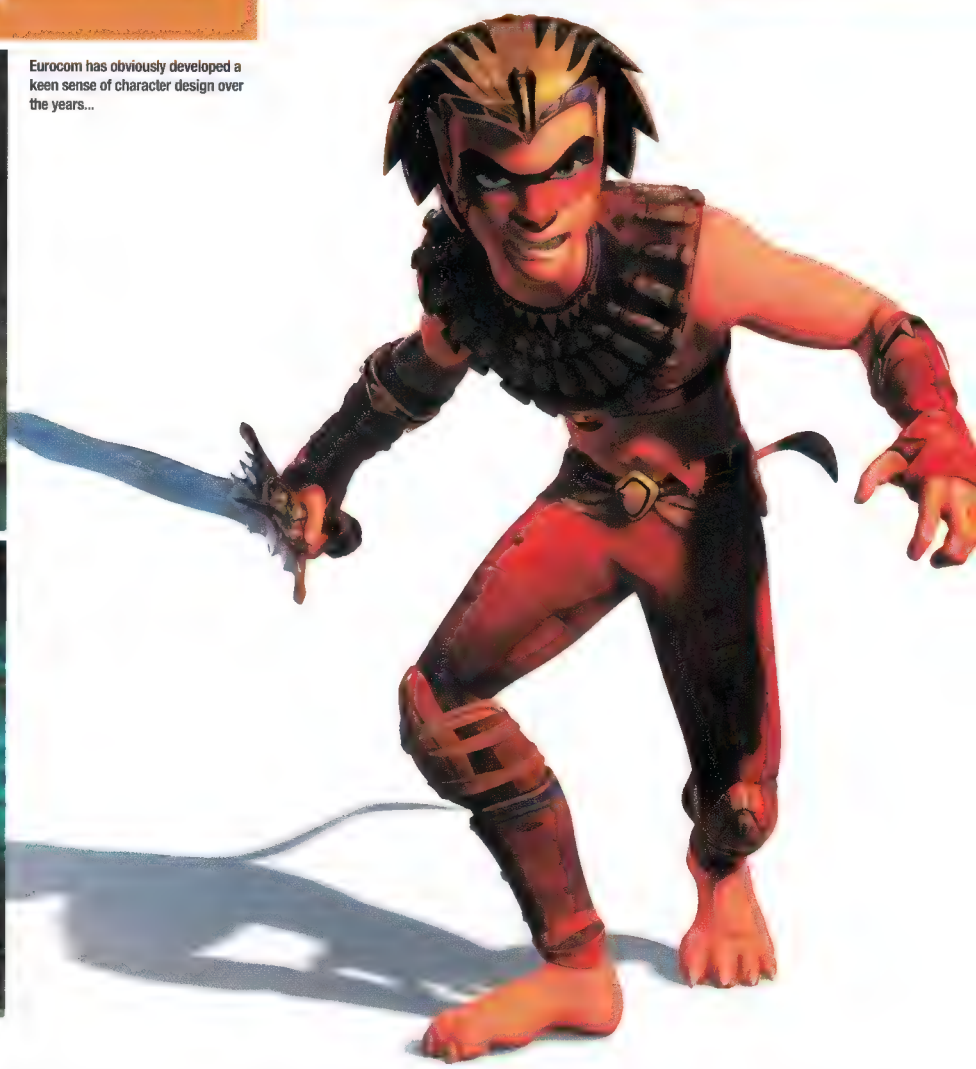
Is there a lead platform or is each version being developed specifically for their respective hardware?
Not really, we try to play to the strengths of each piece of hardware where we can.

In our opinion, there are far too few games set among an Egyptian backdrop. What lead you in that direction?
We were looking for a cool environment that hadn't been used before and initially we were toying around with an Arabian-style game. Then we designed the Mummy character and everyone loved him. Then it dawned on us that Egyptian mythology was exactly what we were looking for.

The multi-scenario gameplay seems to work extremely well in this case—which is no easy feat to achieve. Can you elaborate for us how you integrate the two?
We really let the story do that for us, so we use cuts to take you from the Sphinx gameplay into the Mummy gameplay...it's almost episodic as the story unfolds between the two characters.

In terms of platforming vs. adventure vs. puzzles, how does the game measure up overall? Is it an equal amalgam or are you leaning in a specific direction?
We've tried to take the best bits of all of them...the player

"I think developing games is so much more sophisticated now than it was say even three years ago..."



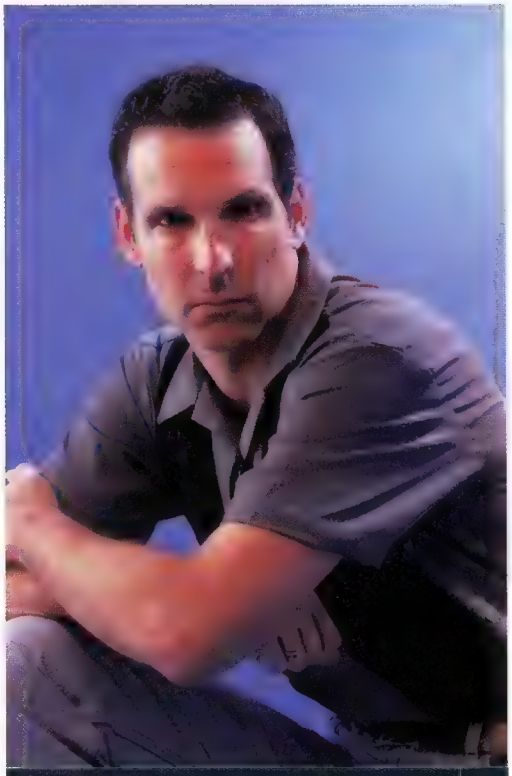
Eurocom has obviously developed a keen sense of character design over the years...

Sphinx and the Shadow of Set

system:**ps2, gamecube, xbox** / developer: **eurocom** / publisher: **thq** / available: **fall**

Master of Monsters

Todd McFarlane and Konami join forces again, this time, bringing Todd's Monsters to life as the opposing force in the upcoming game McFarlane's Monsters. We caught up with Todd for the lowdown on his next foray into the digital realm...



todd mcfarlane / our santa claws

words dave halverson

As a long time fan, collector and admirer of your work, let me first say that it's beyond exciting seeing a video game that seems to reflect the prowess of your designs. How involved are you with the development of Evil Prophecy?
In my companies, I have some of the hardest-working and most creative people around, whom I can call on to develop these types of projects. As far as my involvement, my team and I did the character design, including the monster hunters and animated intro segment. I've also worked with the development team on some gameplay elements. It's definitely a collaboration between the two companies.

Is the game related to your Monsters Collection, or is it an entirely new concept?
You bet. I'm always looking for ways to bring my creations to a new audience, and have a long-standing relationship with Konami. When they asked me about doing another project, the Monsters property stood out. It was a great way to bring the world of Monsters to life.

Having only seen screens to this point, the game seems to scream manic 3D action and spell casting. How close am I?
Well, the game has crazy amounts of action and spell casting. Each character has different abilities as well as characteristics, which makes it a very interesting gameplay experience.

Will Evil Prophecy cross over and perhaps spawn (hehe) a toy line, comic, or animated work?
Obviously, the game is based on the toys we've produced in the past, and we're continuing the Monsters toy line. As we speak, we're preparing to release McFarlane's Monsters 2: The Twisted Land of Oz, which is based on the Wizard of Oz mythology. As for the game crossing over into another medium, it's always a possibility.

I also noticed a bevy of potion vials, along with a level indicator, and what appears to be a large map. Will we be mixing concoctions?
Are there vast adventure elements and perhaps some integrated story in here? Yes, you're correct. Even though the game is action based, it tells a great story and captures the feel of the Monsters world. We didn't want to create a game that didn't have a great adventure experience.

Do you play or at least keep up with the video-game industry and its trends?
I don't really play a lot of games, but I do follow the industry as a whole the best I can. Between my family and my businesses and my other interests, I don't have a lot of spare time for gaming. But, I appreciate the production side of the industry, especially the design and work that goes into a game. I see quite a bit of the artistic side of game creation, which is ultimately what interests me the most.

Recently you've had a hand in Shrek and Soul Calibur. Might we see an actual game development studio bearing your name anytime soon? Vin Diesel's doing it.
You know, that's something I could see myself doing in the future because, as an artist, I find the process very interesting. I've always likened video games to shooting a film. You've got all these elements that you have to tie together into some sort of whole that is both exciting and cool. But, at this time, I've been working on so many other project that I couldn't put the amount of time and resources in to do it right.

Will the cut scenes be real-time or will you add some of your Trademark animation?
We are working on the animated intro to the game and Konami is creating the real-time cut scenes. You're going to see some pretty exciting things!

What brought you to Konami? And while we're on the subject—where are my Castlevania figures?!
My companies have had positive experiences with Konami in the past. We've worked hand-in-hand with Kojima-san on the Metal Gear Solid figures and we released Spawn on Color Gameboy with Konami back in the 1990s. To me, having a good relationship with a company is important and that's why we're working with Konami again.

Nothing says I love you like a horde of bloodthirsty demonic skeletons...

The state of video game action figures is quite sad. Why don't we see more from McFarlane? BloodRayne, Jet Set Radio Future, Metroid, Primal, Rygar, Halo, Maximo... I could go on and on. Is there just not a large enough market to warrant production? How big does a game need to be to warrant a toy line?
We're always being approached by companies to do figures and I feel that video games translate well into figure development. We pick and choose the projects we work on based on a number of things, including how big and popular a game is with those who play it. And, we're always attempting to align ourselves with the best in a field, so I'd say for us to get involved it would have to be a top game, like those you've mentioned. But, the game can't have just one main, recognizable character, as in Halo. You've got to have four, five or six to translate to an action-figure line.

You've been doing a lot of sports stuff lately and, while you certainly do it well, I fall on the fantasy side of the McFarlane fence. You won't forget about us, I hope.
Anyone who knows me and my work knows I've had a weakness for monsters as long as I can remember. A few years ago, I had a chance to work with Maurice Sendak for the Where the Wild Things Are figures we created. It was his creations, his monsters that as a kid I thought were the coolest. With that said, you can always count on my company to produce monster and horror figures.

"We're always being approached by companies to do figures and I feel that video games translate well into figure development. We pick and choose the projects we work on based on a number of things, including how big and popular a game is with those who play it."

McFarlanes Monsters
system: **xbox, ps2/** developer: **konami/** publisher: **konami/** available: **fall**

Nasty Girls

Up close and personal with the Cy Girls

words dave halverson

Produced by KCEJ's Atsushi Horigami (Ephemeral Fantasia, 7 Blades), Cy Girls is Konami's sexy cool new cyber-babe action thriller set in the distant future, years after "Damnation Monday" sent the world order crashing to its knees. Humankind had become completely reliant on "jacking in" for nearly every facet of life: work, entertainment, diet regimen, you name it. The proliferation of virtual convenience gave way to a peaceful society in which crime became a relic of the past, until that fateful day when the satellites shut down and the impregnable network was decimated in an afternoon. Governments fell and the social structure collapsed. Ultimately it was the FGC Corporation who stepped in and repaired the network, using their new OS, restoring order and gaining the public trust. Soon, industry became dependent on their network systems' management.

Fifteen years later, residual effects of the change in power have taken their toll on society—now divided between the super rich and the super poor—giving rise to rampant cyber-terrorism and illicit operations on the net. Word of a secret agency cleaning things up spread; elite Special Forces, highly skilled and equipped with techno-gadgets to erase these threats and clean up their mess. Seldom seen, witnesses describe them as women adorned with CG-labeled goods and accessories, thus they became known as "Cy Girls." In the game you can play as either Ice, weapons expert, or Aska, martial arts master, in both the real world and the VR world. We caught up with them in our world for a little one-on-two.

play: First, Ice...why are you named Ice?
ICE: It's my CG codename but people have been calling me Ice since before I joined Cy Girls. As to why, let's see... well I guess it's because I'm so cool! *smile*

And modest... Aska?
ASKA: Aska means "flying bird" in Japanese and is my birth name. I was raised as a ninja though, so I suppose you could say it was intended as a codename.

Oh yeah, how so? Wait, don't answer that. Tell us what you remember about Damnation Monday? What was it like afterwards?
ICE: Well, I wasn't born yet, but based on what I've heard about it, some idiot somewhere did something stupid that caused the whole world's network to crash. For many years afterwards—come to think of it, as far back as I can remember from my childhood—the world was a total chaotic mess. I'll tell you one thing though: I will personally make sure this kind of incident never happens again.
ASKA: Of course, I wasn't born then either.

Yeah, I gathered that...
ASKA: *smirk* In the course of my work, I've heard a lot about the aftereffects of that terrible event, and I can tell you, the world was in a truly frightful state. It's made me realize how very fragile our computer-dependent society really is.

When the FGC got the world network back up and running, did you have any inclination they were up to no good? How long before the trouble began?
ICE: Well, at first no one thought of them as a "bad" corporation per se. Just as greedy and exploitive...

So they were like AOL? Never mind...
ICE: ...as is the norm with these kinds of entities. Whenever people have too much power or money, things always seem to take a turn for the worse, you know.
For example, if you were given $1000 every day... At first you'd be thrilled, right? But if this were to continue for a while, I'd bet you'd start wanting more. Especially when you realize how having some money can make it easier to use others to your advantage in order to make more and more, until you are getting $100,000 a day.
Me? I'd love to have loads of money because there is so much I want to buy! *laugh* But seriously, unless I earn it myself by honest means, I just don't want it.

Check please!
ASKA: Nobody realized or even noticed how malicious their plans really were at the time. After all, they managed to conceal their true intentions for many years by laying blame on a different company. I learned the details of what happened while hunting down the man responsible for my father's death.

We're just here for the game...let's not go there. In 2084, is Michael Jackson still alive?
ICE: You know, I've met Michael in CY-D (Cyberspace). His data, as well as his presence, still exists in that realm. Why don't you take a dive and see if you can find him?
ASKA: Michael...who? Oh, a pop music star? Sorry, but I personally find such things distasteful, so I can't say.

Let's just move on. So, what exactly is a "Cy Girl"?
ICE: Cy Girls are members of a special "women's only" unit of the Cardinal Garrison organization. There are a number of different missions we carry out, but I'd have to say that anti-terrorist, especially cyber-terrorism, enforcement is by far our biggest responsibility. We work in teams of five with different people in charge of different roles. A Navigator handles the command communication and two Singers provide combat support. The Salvagers assist with rescues and escapes, while the Diver is responsible for diving into Cy-D and completing the mission objectives.
ASKA: The Cardinal Garrison to which the Cy Girls belong to is quite a mysterious organization. Although I myself am a member, there's a lot even I don't know about it. However, in all my experience working for them, there is not a single mission or order that I have not considered morally or ethically justified. We Cy Girls have the leeway to act on our own discretion so we don't need to worry so much about the powers that be. While I am somewhat curious, it is the way of the ninja to not investigate the motivations of the client we serve.

How do you feel about being manipulated by thousands of young males?
ICE: Hmm, I honestly haven't really given it much thought. I don't have much experience being used by men you know...usually it's the other way around. These young men

"Michael...who? Oh, a pop music star? Sorry, but I personally find such things distasteful, so I can't say." *–Aska*

Okay, stand still, this won't hurt a bit...

may believe they are doing the manipulating, but perhaps it is really me manipulating them. *laugh*
ASKA: Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter because a ninja is really like a puppet, you know. It is vital to repress the self at all times and under any circumstance.

Okay, grasshopper. Don't you ever get tired of them staring at your butt?
ICE: If people like what they see, it certainly doesn't bother me. *wink*
But I'll tell you a secret, by changing the View Mode, users can also stare at my front. Did you know about that?
ASKA: (her face turns crimson as she averts her eyes) Are they really staring that much?

Which do you prefer: hand-to-hand combat or firearms?
ICE: Of course I prefer firearms. Give me a gun and I can take down any man. But I do enjoy hand-to-hand combat from time to time. For me, the best way to deal with an annoying jerk is to punch his lights out. Wouldn't you agree? Oh, I don't mean *you*, dear. *laugh*
ASKA: (slightly offended) The only weapon I trust is my Katana. As long as I have it, I have no need nor want for firearms. And if someone shoots at me, I simply cut the bullet down with a flick of my Katana.

Has Konami introduced you to Solid Snake yet? Did he ask you to take a ride on his skateboard?
ICE: I've heard a lot of talk about him but we have yet to be introduced. Perhaps he's concerned about falling for me? Surely he'd be unable to resist my charms.
ASKA: I'm sure we'll meet someday but I'm really not interested in him. You see, there is this intriguing "Cyborg Ninja" I keep hearing about. Now he is definitely my type. I am curious about how much ability he has... Oh, I'd love to challenge him to a duel.

Perhaps in the sequel. What would you like to say to all the gamers out there thinking about buying your game?
ICE: Join me for some thrilling action and let's take down the bad guys together!
ASKA: There is truth that can be found in times of peace. However, there is also truth that can only be found through battle. That is why I fight for justice. I seek your cooperation to enable this.

I feel safer already. Thanks, girls.
ASKA: *deep bow* You're welcome.
ICE: Thanks! I appreciate the thought. But who needs luck with all this skill? Hey, you wouldn't happen to know of a good bar around here, would you?

Treasure's Masato Maegawa

"We wanted Ikaruga to be played by as many game fans as possible, from young to adult."

Treasure, the ever-so-modest Shinjuku-based game studio, has been responsible for some of gaming's most brilliant moments. With their latest release, a sparkling version of the shooter Ikaruga for Nintendo GameCube, they once again demonstrate that their knack for developing perfected play mechanics has not faded. We were granted a short chat with Treasure's president, Masato Maegawa.

What is the significance of the name "Ikaruga"? It is a type of bird, is it not?
Of course, it is the name of a bird, but there are other meanings. It is also one of the names of a Buddhist temple in southern Japan which was built in the seventh century by the prince Shotoku Taishi. Ikaruga Temple is the oldest standing Buddhist temple today.

Treasure still manages to innovate in the shooter genre, long after other developers have run out of ideas. Is this a trend that you will continue, or is Ikaruga the last overhead shooter that you will make?
We plan to continue developing shooting games.

How many team members worked on Ikaruga, and what games did they contribute to in the past?
The core part of the team is three persons, but several external people also helped us in this development.

Why did you decide to port the game to GameCube?
We wanted Ikaruga to be played by as many game fans as possible, from young to adult players. The GameCube was the perfect platform to achieve such a project. Besides, this hardware could allow us to achieve a version even better than the arcade original. These are the main reasons why we decided to bring Ikaruga to GameCube.

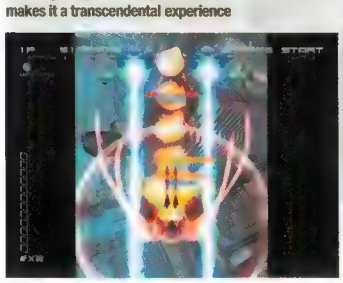
How was the conversion from Dreamcast to GameCube? Was it difficult?
It is difficult to explain it simply, but basically, it is easier to convert to the GameCube than to the Dreamcast.

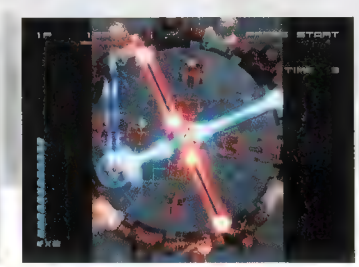
What is the future of Treasure? Can you envisage the company coming under the auspices of a giant like Nintendo, Sony, or Microsoft, or would you prefer to stay as independent as possible?
Several secret projects are currently in development in our studios, but we can't tell you anything about it now. The only thing I can say to game fans is to enjoy Ikaruga for GameCube. And since Treasure will continue creating games as we always have, you can expect some new exciting action games in the future!

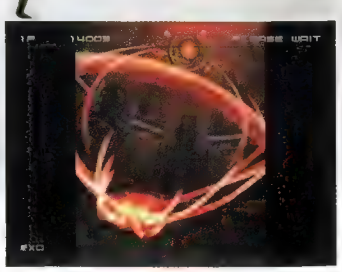
Do you feel that the enthusiast game market is shrinking? If so, will this affect the direction of future Treasure games?
Shooting has a stable popularity among core users, whereas the number of players for an RPG or action title can fluctuate. With shooters, you can always expect a certain minimum number of sales.

Finally, will we ever see a revival of Treasure greats like Gunstar Heroes, Dynamite Headdy, Alien Soldier, etc., on the Game Boy Advance?
No comment.

Treasure's Ikaruga is certainly a giant in the pantheon of overhead shooters, boasting a depth of design that truly makes it a transcendental experience

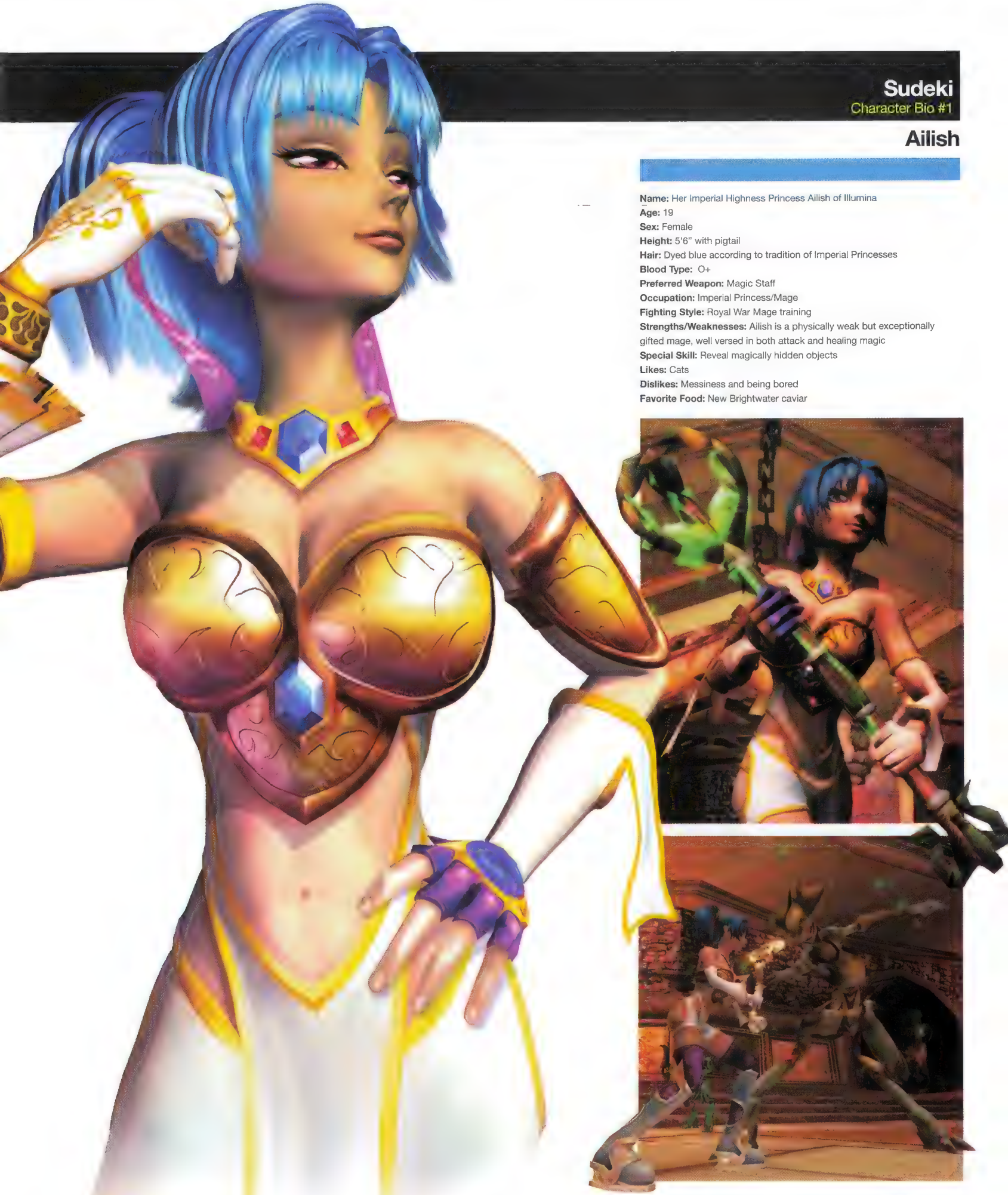






Ailish

Name: Her Imperial Highness Princess Ailish of Illumina
Age: 19
Sex: Female
Height: 5'6" with pigtail
Hair: Dyed blue according to tradition of Imperial Princesses
Blood Type: O+
Preferred Weapon: Magic Staff
Occupation: Imperial Princess/Mage
Fighting Style: Royal War Mage training
Strengths/Weaknesses: Ailish is a physically weak but exceptionally gifted mage, well versed in both attack and healing magic
Special Skill: Reveal magically hidden objects
Likes: Cats
Dislikes: Messiness and being bored
Favorite Food: New Brightwater caviar



It's the water

Baldur's Gate Dark Alliance 2

words dave halverson

In the realm of top-down action and role playing, Black Isle lord over the category with an iron fist. Save for Dungeons & Dragons—which is ironically carved from the same stone—until the rest of the relics of PC gaming decide to wake up and smell the controller, Baldur's Gate stands pretty much alone. Still, Black Isle continue to evolve their title. The water (and effects overall), models, textures and music in Dark Alliance were the stuff of legend, and this time out, they're looking to innovate further and really open the game up in terms of control and diversity. As the once mighty PC giant changes its game for console, the brand is born again, and at least for now, games of this wonderful ilk will remain in our grasp.

Interview Dave Maldonado, Lead Designer

You know the old saying: if it ain't broke... Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance was and is the pinnacle of top-down gaming on console, although you've obviously found room for improvement. Going down the list, can you give us some insight on these specific elements?

Environments: We wanted diverse terrain (hills, mountain passes, etc.) and crazy water; we got both. What's next? The current list of levels contains a diverse array of environments: sprawling, abandoned dwarf holds, eerie bone-strewn wastelands, a huge Gothic-style castle, the winding, bramble-filled paths of dark forests, other planes of existence (the Elemental Planes of Fire and Air, for example), bizarre Lovecraftian sea-temples and so on. There's quite a few of them!

For those already familiar with the Forgotten Realms setting, there are a number of famous (infamous?) areas in and around the Western Heartlands: the dungeons beneath Dragonspear Castle, the Halls of the Hammer, and Lyran's Hold in the Forest of Wyrms, among others.

Characters: We got to play dress-up (this must remain!) and the models (both characters main and ancillary) were impeccable.

We've got five initially playable characters instead of three this time around, and I think players will note that they've all got their own particular look or style—that is, one character's full plate armor won't look the same as every other's. The dress-up factor is still there, of course; in fact, it's augmented by the new item creation system that allows players to construct their own customized magical equipment.

Besides kobolds, ogres, and displacer beasts, will we see many new enemies?

Oh yeah, tons—we've really expanded upon the bestiary. Many rank among the D&D staples—you know, ghouls, hobgoblins, goblin wolf-riders, troglodytes, ochre jellies, trolls and a lot more. There's quite a few of the bigger guys, too: new dragons, a new giant, owl bears, basilisks, etc. We've even got a few of the more, eh, odd monsters, like ropers and rust monsters, at the moment. Lastly, there are a couple of brand new monsters in the works: for example, the various abominations that Luvia Bloodmire (a rather deranged alchemist) has been working on beneath her manor in Baldur's Gate. What I mentioned above...I don't think that's even half the list. So anyhow, yeah, a lot of new monsters!

Diversity: I suppose this is one aspect of Dark Alliance that does invite innovation since it was on the short side and the three quests were quite similar...

The game is definitely looking to be more than a bit longer than the original, and with substantially different side quests. Many of BGDA's side quests saw the player looking for an item in an area he or she has to be in already; we're hoping to give more of a free-form feel to BGDA2's side quests: for example, finding an entirely new, optional area while traveling from one location to another, or being sent on an optional quest that's totally unrelated to the main story.

Control: What about a lock-on or strafe move; will either be added? The DA bosses would have been more manageable with one or the other.

No lock-on or strafe has been added, though there have been some minor tweaks to the controls. We want to keep them as friendly as possible, of course. We've got a new "shift system" that allows the player to have up to five abilities (spells or feats) readied at any one time—as opposed to the one the first game had—and easily switch them around at a moment's notice. Characters can sprint, preventing the player to have to

hop about or Bull Rush to get anywhere quickly. Missile combat—including the casting of unguided spells like Melf's Acid Arrow—has been made substantially less frustrating, with the ability to turn a sort of fire control/partial auto-aim system on and off on the fly. There are other changes and additions, as well, but nothing that should be too hard to get used to.

Bosses: will you be creating more of the larger monstrosities akin to Xantam the Beholder or will they be predominantly human in form?
There are definitely some crazy bosses in the works, yeah, both man-sized and "gi-normous." The dragons are appropriately huge, of course; there's a Zhentarim skymage that flies around on a manticore, a wizard that calls in a monster so big the whole thing won't fit on one screen, and a host of other bosses (and sub-bosses) big and small...so there's lots of wacky boss-fight goodness to be had.

Music: Good luck improving here. Will it be event-driven or constant?
We intend to stay true to the original there: constant music and ambient effects, occasionally interrupted by event music...for example, the classical "BOSS FIGHT!" score.

Baldur's Gate: The town was smallish and somewhat limited in terms of interaction. Have you expanded either the village or the interaction with its inhabitants?
We initially intended to do something like that, but in the end the team felt it would be better to focus more on additional areas, non-player characters, and side-quests rather than bopping about Baldur's Gate and chatting it up with the townies. Nonetheless, the game does have more characters to interact with—and more interaction with them—than the original. Quite a few are much more personally involved with the player and his or her quest than the various side-quest characters one ran into in the first Dark Alliance.

Will you be moving the camera around at all, perhaps moving it in at certain times?
We're playing with the idea of player-controlled zoom, but I doubt there will be anything drastic like first-person mode.

Dark Alliance's textures, lighting and effects were impeccable, although the Xbox version wasn't bump mapped. Will the Xbox version be meatier than the PS2 or GameCube this time around?
The engineers are still experimenting with that stuff at this point, so I'm not really the one to ask. I know they've got some nice anti-aliasing going that makes things look super-clean and crisp, especially on our HDTVs. We'd certainly like to get as much oomph out of the PS2 and Xbox as we can without having to drastically overhaul the engine.

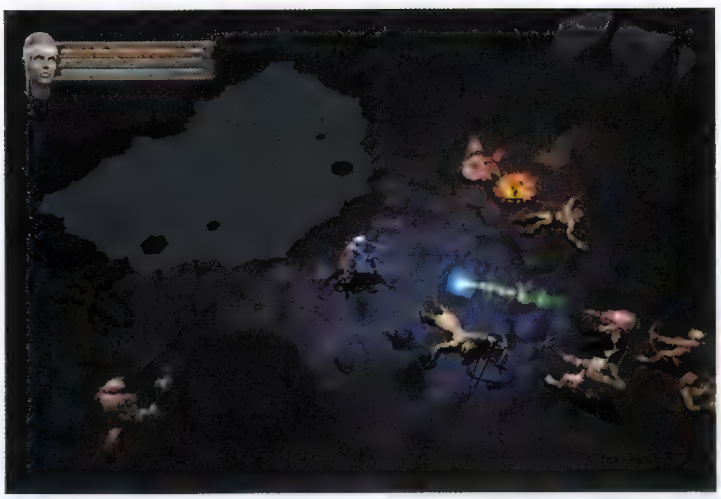
What about the role-playing aspects: will the equipping, spell casting, character attributes and monetary system work the same?
For the most part, yes. The characters' ability scores (Strength, Dexterity, Wisdom, etc.) will play a bigger part in the sequel, though...they didn't affect much in the original game, especially towards the middle-end.

We have two-weapon fighting (a weapon in each hand) in now, as well as crossbows and thrown weapons (axes, knives, vials of holy water, whatever), but we've also tweaked the way other weapon types (polearms, two-handed weapons, etc.) work enough so that they all feel a bit like new additions, too.

The monetary system is much the same from an in-game standpoint, but from a meta-game standpoint, we hope to resolve some of the first game's issues...chiefly the "I have 7,834,190 gold pieces and an extra complete set +5 elven full plate...and nothing to do with it" situation.

Will the story unfold in real-time or through cinema? Is there more story integration?

"There are definitely some crazy bosses in the works, yeah, both man-sized and 'gi-normous.'"



A bit of both, though most of it happens in "you are there" time—the player talking to other characters, discovering journals, even eavesdropping on occasion and so on. There are still a few "meanwhile" cutscenes, though, to foreshadow events, further explain things, etc. I think there's definitely more of an involving story in this game; yeah, that's something we wanted to address. BGDA2's story both wraps up the previous game's and has its own long, twisting arc. Should be good stuff.

What about platforming and puzzle elements? Will there be more of either, or both?
There are definitely some platforming elements in the game, yes—swinging pendulum traps, wind-lashed, icy precipices, battles on narrow bridges over gaping chasms, crumbling tiles, that sort of thing. We hope they prove challenging without being needlessly frustrating. Puzzles aren't a huge part of the game, but there are plans for a few of them, yes.

Can we still play with the fire on the loading screen (heh heh)?
No, sorry. We found that with all the new additions to the game, there simply wasn't room for the thousands of lines of extremely complex FirePlay™ code. Actually, to be perfectly honest, we're not certain how the loading screens will look just yet!

Buffy The Vampire Slayer 2 Chaos Bleeds

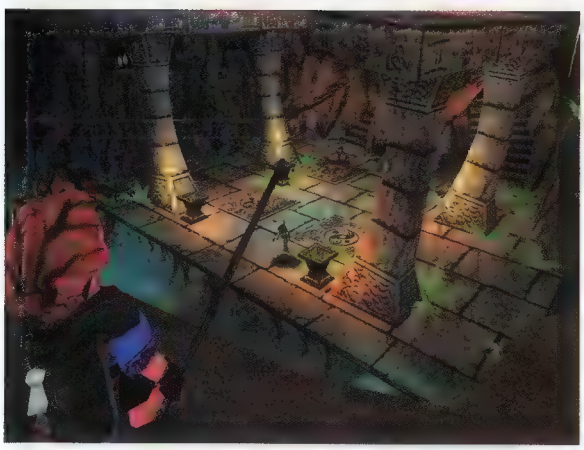
system: **ps2, xbox, gc** */ developer:* **eurocom** */ publisher:* **sierra** */ available:* **q3**

Buffy fans ready to get back to virtual Sunnydale will be happy to learn that in Chaos Bleeds—based on a "lost episode" from season five where a dimensional bleed has been enabled by pure evil to consume humanity once and for all—five characters will be playable, all voiced by the same talent as their TV personas: Buffy, Angel, Willow, Xander and Spike. Look for the same type of adventure and combat-inspired gameplay too, adorned with volumetric fog, animated textures, vertex lighting and image reflections, plus action-responsive music and audio.

The Simpsons: Hit and Run

system: **ps2, xbox, gc** */ developer:* **radical ent.** */ publisher:* **vivendi universal games** */ available:* **sept**

Looks like GTA Simpsons...can't smell it though, or taste it. The Simpsons: Hit & Run promises hilarious mission-based driving along with out-of-the-car platform gameplay. Together with the satire of The Simpsons, and the freak show that is Springfield, this has to be good. Explore the interiors of locations like the Kwik-E-Mart, the power plant and even the Simpsons' home in a brand new story—nay, mystery—with dialogue written by the series writers and performed, of course, by the original cast.



The Hobbit Prelude to The LOTR

system: **ps2, xbox, gc** */ developer:* **inevitable ent.** */ publisher:* **sierra** */ available:* **sept**

Of all the LOTR games, this is the one to watch. Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit—the prelude to The Lord of the Rings—The Hobbit is pure adventure platforming akin to Zelda, journeying from the Shire to the forests of Mirkwood and beyond, scouring the bowels of Middle Earth, solving puzzles, climbing nasty peaks and warding off trolls and the like. Bilbo jumps, ledge-grabs, shimmies, climbs ropes and ladders...you get the gist. Me needsss it, me wantsss it.

Crash Nitro Kart

system: **ps2, xbox, gc** */ developer:* **vicarious visions** */ publisher:* **vivendi universal games** */ available:* **q4**

Because there is no such thing as too many kart racers, Crash is coming around for a few more laps (someone call Kincade, his game is ready). Kidnapped by the ruthless Emperor Velo, Crash is forced to race in his galactic coliseum in order to save Earth from destruction. Even though it was Crash who got himself kidnapped, you can play as any character in the Crash universe on 17 high-speed raceways and four unique worlds. Looks amazing, yes?

Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu

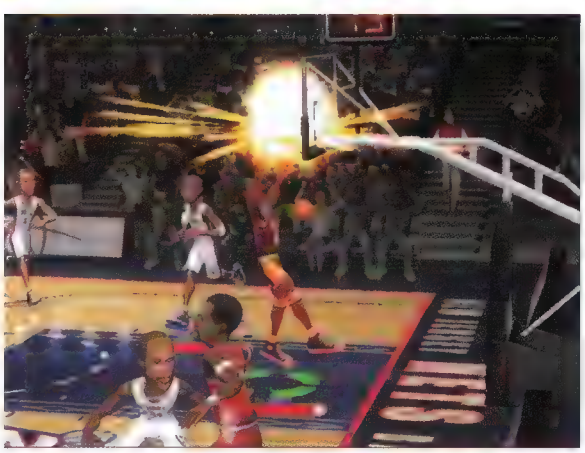
system: ***gba, xbox, ps2, gc*** */ developer:* ***ubisoft montreal*** */ publisher:* ***ubisoft*** */ available:* ***fall***

Debuting the first new Batman character ever in a video game—the villain Sin Tzu—Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu is an action-heavy romp through Gotham City that invites two players at once to battle the likes of Bane, Clayface, and Scarecrow—it's their first appearance in a game as well—employing up to 35 attacks and martial art combos. You can assume the role of Robin, Nightwing, Batman or the slinky Batgirl, taking to the dark city streets of over 12 levels, including Crime Alley, Arkham Asylum, and Gotham City Docks.

Futurama: The Game

system: ***ps2, xbox, gc*** */ developer:* ***uds*** */ publisher:* ***sierra*** */ available:* ***august***

The latest toon-shaded toon headed our way, Futurama: The Game (nice title), is a third-person platform shooter featuring Fry, Leela and Bender doing what they do best: traveling through time for one reason or another so we don't all die a horrible death. The game will feature all the main characters from the TV show possessing his or her own skills and attributes, and it's being penned by the TV show's writers and its composer.



NBA Jam

system: ***ps2, xbox, gc*** */ developer:* ***acclaim studios austin*** */ publisher:* ***acclaim*** */ available:* ***oct***

The original extreme basketball game is back, continuing its 3-on-3 madness with crazy dunks, supercharged blocks and all the outrageous athleticism of the real NBA players that the series has been known for from the start. Over 700 new motion-captured animations have been thrown in, and when you want a break from the signature moves of the modern boys, grab a team from as early as the 1950s, complete with music, uniforms and look of the era of your liking. And the absolute must: Tim Kitzrow is returning to voice the commentary

The Lord of the Rings: The Treason of Isengard

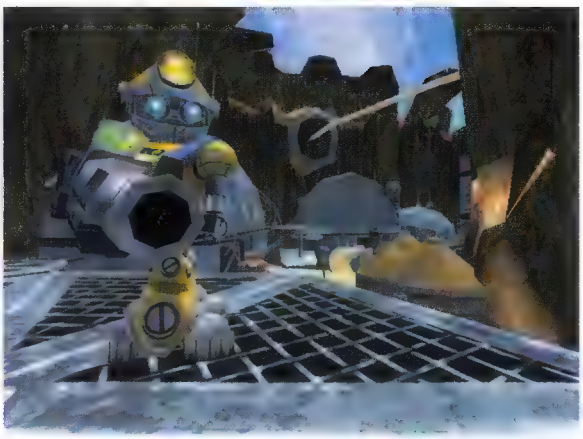
system: ***ps2, xbox*** */ developer:* ***surreal software*** */ publisher:* ***black label games/vivendi universal games*** */ available:* ***summer***

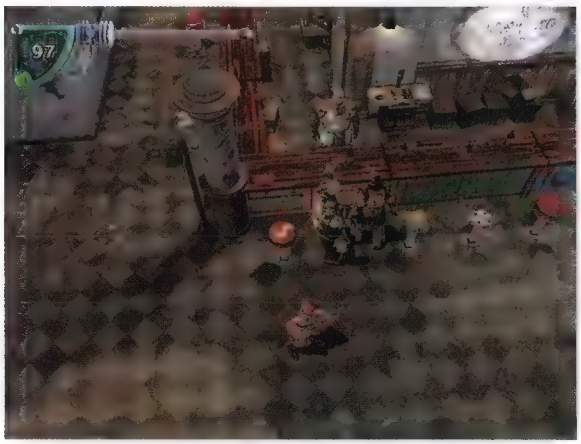
Continuing the story left off in last year's adventure, The Lord of the Rings: The Treason of Isengard details the plight of Tolkien's grand characters as their struggles parallel those told in the book. Men, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs alike pine for the One Ring, caught in fierce battle scenes where control of multiple combatants is yours.

Metal Arms Glitch In The System

system: ***xbox, gc*** */ developer:* ***swingin' ape*** */ publisher:* ***vivendi universal games*** */ available:* ***nov***

In an experiment gone wrong on the robot society of Iron Gate, a super-robot is created, General Corrosive. He destroys his makers and decides it's time to make an army and rule the world. He may have been found in scrap metal, but Glitch is the hero type, so he decides to find 18 weapons, drive 4 combat vehicles, collect some pow-erups and even possess both friends and foes in an effort to return his world back to normal.





Fallout Brotherhood of Steel

system: ***pc, xbox*** */ developer:* ***interplay*** */ publisher:* ***vivendi universal games*** */ available:* ***october***

Ohhhh yeah, Fallout's finally coming to console. In Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel, the world has been left in nuclear ruin, instilling fear of the inevitable apocalypse in all who live in this wasteland. Where the accomplished PC series placed more of an emphasis on strategy and role-playing elements, this latest Fallout is being driven by more action, with two players able to pool their efforts towards finding a device capable of aiding in the rebuilding of mankind.

Gladius

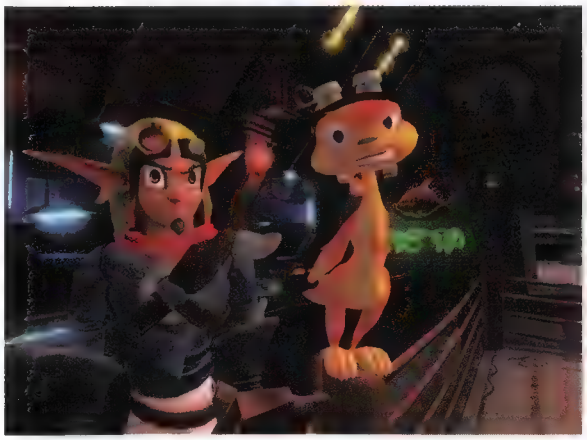
system: ***ps2, xbox, gc*** */ developer:* ***lucasarts*** */ publisher:* ***lucasarts*** */ available:* ***spring***

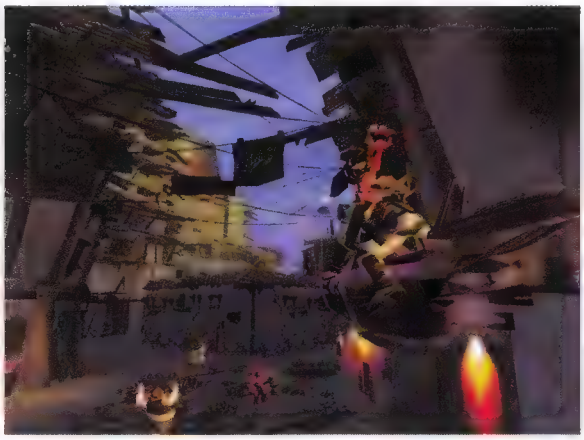
Ursula and Valens recruit and teach a team of warriors to be killer gladiators in the very promising Gladius, a game that rewards you for the level of your brutality. So much more than a raw action experience, Gladius actually requires you to train your warriors, growing their experience, skills and various abilities before facing the dangers of the arena. Emphasis is being placed on your management and strategic ability to handle the progression and balance of your team, which are recruited as you travel to different lands. Before you can move to find new warriors and arenas, certificates of approval must be rewarded by the Emperor.

Dragon Ball The Legacy of Goku II

system: ***game boy advance*** */ developer:* ***webfoot*** */ publisher:* ***atari*** */ available:* ***june***

Old school hand-drawn top-down action/role-playing gets the DBZ treatment. This game will undoubtedly fly off of store shelves faster than you can ask, "Dragons have balls?" After a brief interlude, where the two last remaining Saiyans, Trunks and Gohan, attempt to fend off the androids attacking Earth just outside Pepper Town, the game flashes back to Gohan's (son of Goku's) youth, and from there the Legacy of Goku begins in traditional manner—harkening back to Neutopia and the old top-down Zeldas of yesteryear.

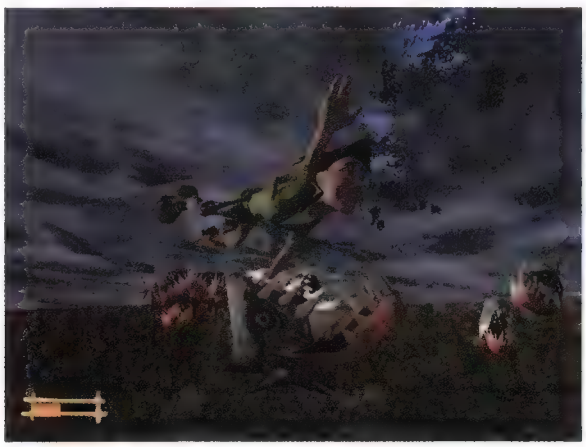




Jak II

*system: **ps2** / developer: **naughty dog** / publisher: **scea** / available: **fall***

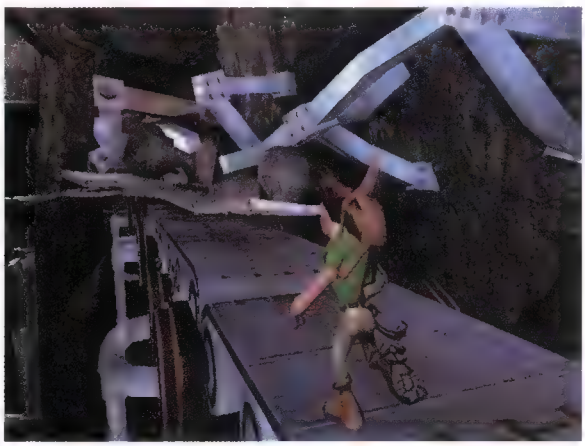
Okay, who is that? I, for one, really loved the old Jak. Daxter on the other hand...would make a nice hat. The proof is in the playing, though, so I'm keeping it zipped until game time. If I know Naughty Dog, I'll be tattooing his likeness on my forehead. If the new, darker Jak, tainted by dark eco, makes way for more hardcore platforming and cool stuff to ride, I suppose I can live with the hair...and if that doesn't do it, an hour-plus of integrated story will surely set me on the path to enlightenment.



Pitfall Harry

*system: **ps2, xbox, gc** / developer: **edge of reality** / publisher: **activision** / available: **fall***

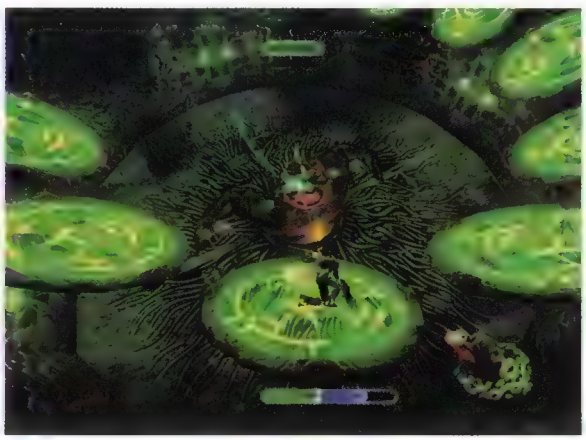
Get the feeling this isn't your father's Pitfall? It's not. This one throws it all our way: classic vine swinging and alligator folly make way to complex living worlds where Harry uses picks to scale shimmering walls of ice, rides a pogo stick and utilizes a bevy of tools in concert with the game's progressively more involving quests. Harry now gains abilities such as a quick dash and special combat moves as he progresses, and you gotta dig the whole SD thing they've got going. After seeing PH in action, we're plenty psyched for his latest escapade.



Smash Cars

*system: **ps2** / developer: **creat studios** / publisher: **metro 3d** / available: **may***

RC cars have been the subject of...what? Twenty games, more or less? They've become a genre unto themselves. Metro 3D hopes to climb to the top of that heap with Smash Cars—a no-holds-barred mode-heavy racer—by doing what the others don't. The worlds in SC are alive, meaning you've got more to worry about than that Warhammer crawling up your rear. All manner of effects are deployed, like animated grass and plants, waves on the beach and realistic engine smoke, and there are enough tricks and nuances in here to keep you busy for days. The quintessential RC game? We'll see.



Dronez

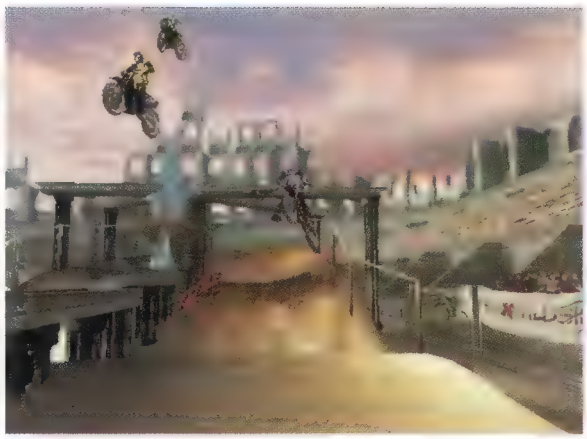
*system: **xbox** / developer: **zetha gamez** / publisher: **metro 3d** / available: **july***

Somebody wake up Jeff Minter...and the yak! Check out the state of Dronez, a trippy cyber-dungeon game that would make the Lawnmower Man dizzy. You control one of three leads on missions to free mankind from the V-Space network that apparently takes command of the future. Battle against Dronez, Replitoids, Insectoids and other such cyber freaks who forbid users to disconnect from their hellish network (hey, just like AOL!). Zetha GameZ? Replitoids? Er, someone's been mainlining the Tempest 2000 soundtrack. Looks like fun!

SX Superstar

system: **ps2, xbox, gc** / *developer:* **climax london** / *publisher:* **acclaim** / *available:* **june**

If anyone can get motocross right, it's Climax London. On the heels of ATV2, we know they have the skills, and they're already in the mode. The cool thing about SX is the ability to take your rider from broke loser to superstar: chicks, pad, cash, the whole nine included. As you win, everything gets cushier. Won't matter much, however, if the game's no fun, so let's hope they can strike the right balance between fantasy and fiction.



Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels

system: **pc, xbox** / *developer:* **lucasarts** / *publisher:* **lucasarts** / *available:* **q4**

LucasArts' beloved 1995 gear-head, Ben, after being framed for murder, is coming back for more in 2003 on PC and console. The long-awaited Full Throttle sequel features outlaw biker Ben, leader of the renegade bike gang the Polecats, kicking ass and taking names. Set as an action/adventure on the road and off, when Ben and company aren't hogging the roads they'll be beating the snot out of something in what is sure to be a hilarious original story. Forget Star Wars, George—start post production pronto. This is what America needs...remember Easy Rider?

Worms 3D

system: **xbox, gc, ps2** / *developer:* **team 17** / *publisher:* **sega europe** / *available:* **summer**

Worms has never been about presentation, but with its new 3D guise, a little more visual spice is being dropped in to the classic gameplay foundation 8 million people have grown to love. While those familiar with Worms will be instantly in tune with this newest take on the classic series, there's tons of new stuff in the mix, like weapons, locations and characters.

True Crime

system: **xbox, ps2, gc** / *developer:* **luxoflux** / *publisher:* **activision** / *available:* **fall**

Christopher Walken, Gary Oldman, Michael Madsen...these are names I never dreamt I'd hear in association with a video game. When you dial up The Continental, I don't care if it's horseshoes!! Inspired by Hong Kong action flicks and American crime dramas, the game, by Luxoflux of Vigilante 8 fame, seamlessly combines car chases, foot pursuits, and hand-to-hand combat amidst a staggeringly realistic re-creation of L.A. I know, sounds like The Getaway... It ain't, trust me.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

*system: **ps2, gc** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami** / available: **q3***

All we know about TMNT at this point is that like the original SNES and Genesis games, it's a beat-'em up; you'll be able to choose your favorite turtle (Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello or Raphael); it's based on the new toon; it's cel shaded (pretty keen ain't we?); and it has a zooming camera. Whether it will play more like Double Dragon or Final Fight we do not know; will the Shell Cycle or Battle Shell make the scene? Dunno. Expect a full report in next month's E3 coverage.

Alias

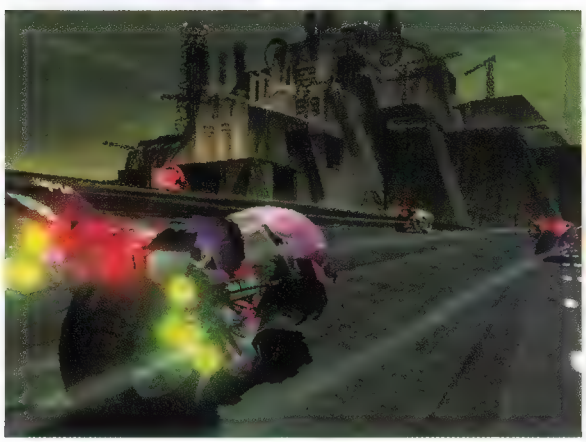
*system: **ps2, xbox, pc** / developer: **acclaim cheltenham** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **fall***

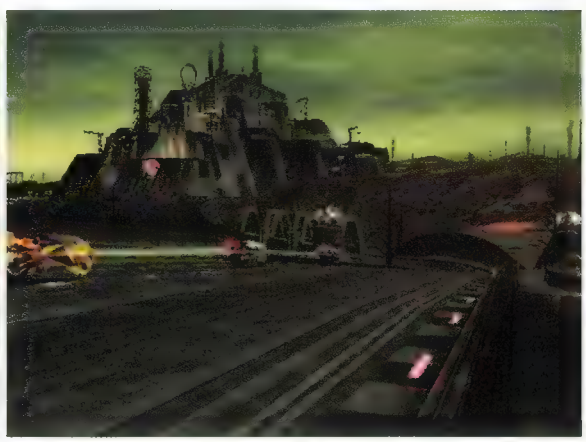
Alias Gear Solid, anyone? We all know Sydney Bristow and how much she'd love to eliminate Arvin Sloan for offing her main squeeze in the tub...looks like she's about to get the chance. Jennifer Garner's looking pretty well-molded in the hands of the skilled Cheltenham boys, and the script for the game, penned by the show's original writers, promises a tale worth playing for. Expect timing stints, stealth, and of course lots of butt kicking, Sydney style.

Gladiator

*system: **ps2, xbox, pc** / developer: **acclaim manchester** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **fall***

Acclaim's Gladiator looks better every time we see it. In a story much like a certain film, the beloved emperor has died an untimely death and been replaced by a tyrant who destroys large portions of Rome to make way for the bloodiest gladiator event the world has ever known. A warrior slave, chosen by the gods to restore the glory of the empire...yada-yada. Check out those skeletons! Gladiator reeks of vintage Ray Harryhausen (*The 7th Voyage of Sinbad, Clash of the Titans*); sign us up! And get the guy some pants—a battle dress or something—before his tackle shows up.

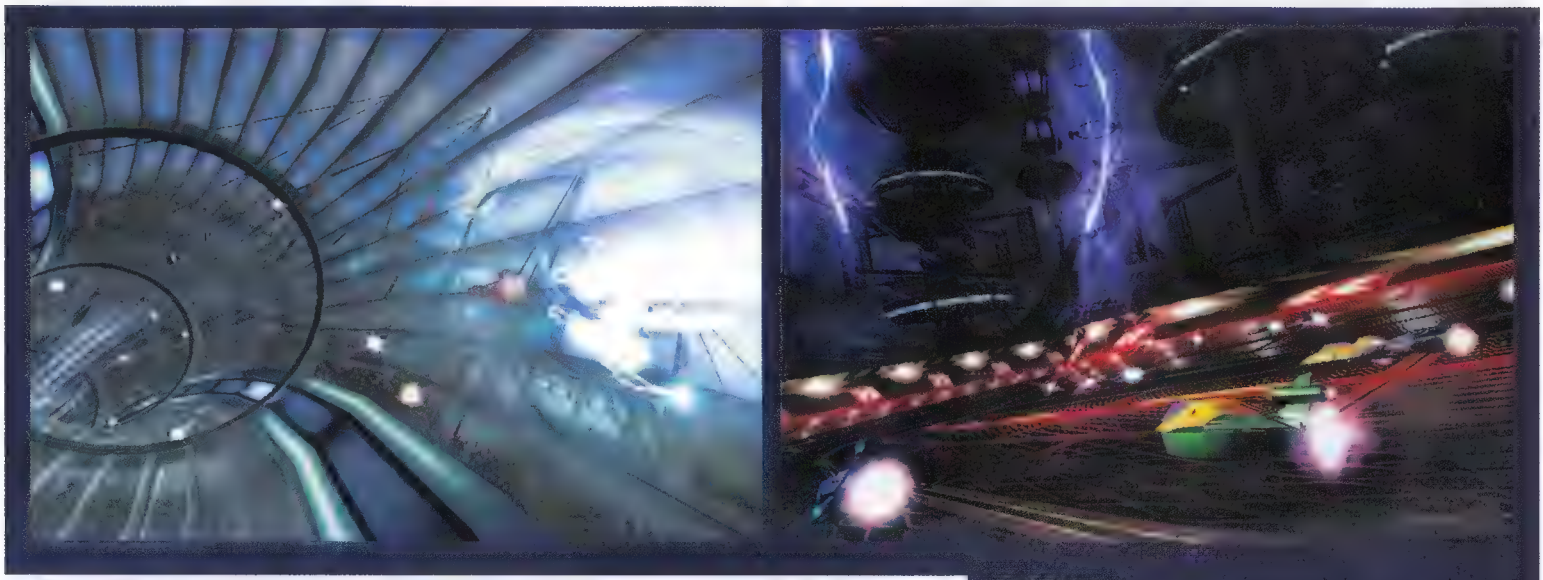




XGRA

*system: **xbox, ps2, gc** / developer: **acclaim cheltenham** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **july***

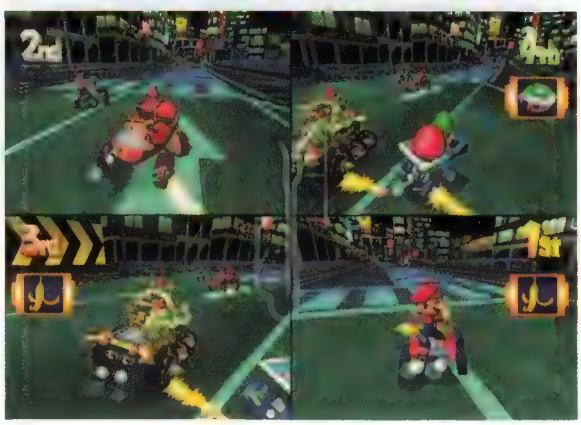
One word: speed. Nothing else can better describe what XGRA embodies. But when you're not honing your skills to hold the line on the 16 incredibly rendered tracks, the new weapons system allows you to go the way of combatant and simply blow the crap out of your opponent or even the track itself, without compromising your concentration on the actual racing. An extensive career mode is being specifically tailored to create an uncommonly convincing feel that you really are a part of an intricate, exciting sport of the future.



F-Zero

developer: **sega** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **summer**

F-Zero has made some big advancements in the past year, but only at E3 will we finally feel the game rather than gawk at it. Perhaps the most interesting news on the this futuristic, light-speed racer is its connection with the arcade version, F-Zero Arcade. After you've destroyed the 20 courses and mastered the 30 pilots, you can take your skills to the arcade and transfer data to and from the units' compatible memory port, finding new parts and working towards new pilots.



Mario Kart Double Dash

developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **2003**

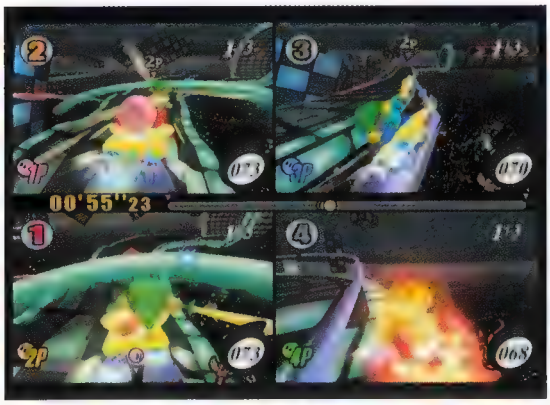
So there was this time when my friend shot a turtle shell from last place, and he had absolutely no way of possibly aiming around that wall, but somehow...

OK, no more walk down memory lane. But for those of you who love Mario Kart as much as I do, you understand how hard it is to mention the game without recalling some of the best moments you've had with a competitive video game. Now to make new ones. In this terribly overdue sequel to Mario Kart 64 (still better than the original, so stop whining), all your favorite characters are returning, plus a few more, like Baby Mario, Birdo and Diddy Kong. Obviously the look is receiving an update—check out the big changes on the kart designs—but the most notable change so far is the new team dynamic. Where before you handled your ride solo, in Mario Kart Double Dash, a friend joins the effort by taking over weapons duty. You can switch your characters back and forth during the race, juggling their strengths and weakness to better tackle the layout of the track accordingly.

Pikmin 2

developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **fall**

Will Olimar's woes never cease? After having escaped the mysterious planet thanks to the help of the indigenous Pikmin, he must now venture back to collect treasure in order to aid his ailing company. This time, he's brought along his assistant, and you'll need to work together, harnessing the power of the Pikmin, which now include at least two new types.



Kirby's Air Ride

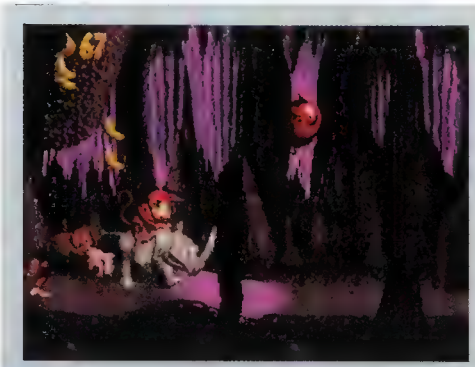
developer: **hal laboratory** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **summer**

Kirby may not stand in the same limelight that Mario and Link have soaked up over the years, but he still deserves his own star action game—one of the best games to date! From the creators of Super Smash Bros., comes Kirby's Air Ride, a racing game that tapped the originality of a one-button control scheme. Of course, Kirby will find ways to [illegible] and [illegible] to the fore.

game of the month

60

Wario World

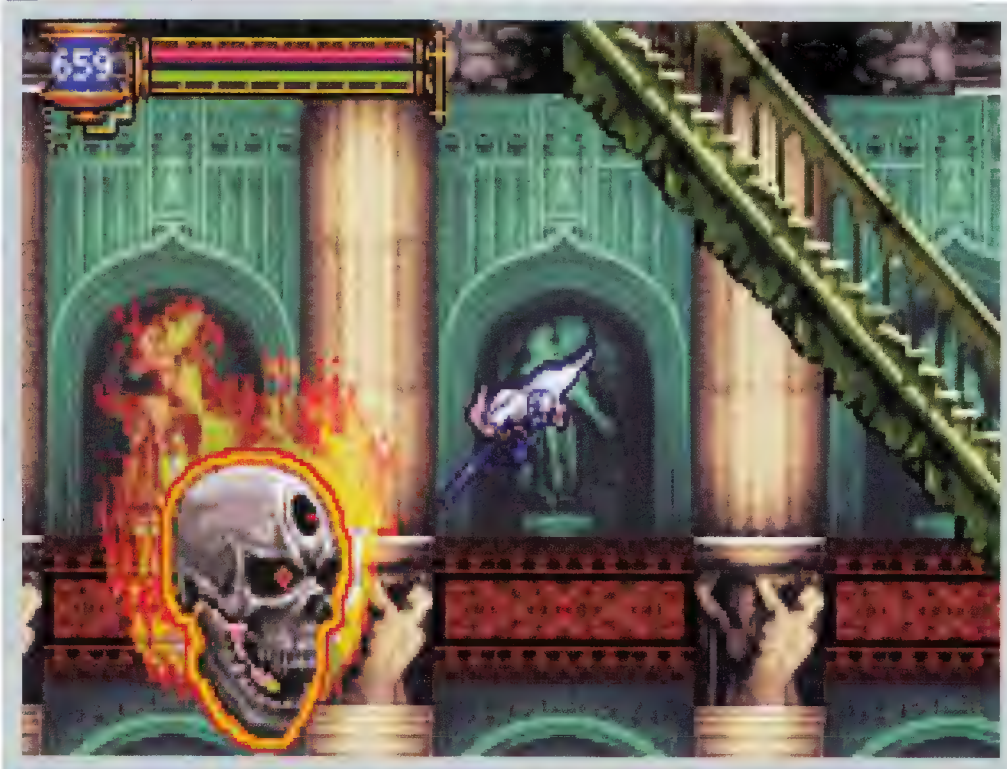


Donkey Kong Country

*system: **gba** / developer: **rare** / publisher: **nintendo***

I'd like to say that no matter how much time goes by, DKC remains every bit the sensation it was back in 1994 when it knocked the 16-bit world on its backside... so I will, because it does. How can a game so rudimentary be so much damn fun? I mean, you bounce, roll, throw, climb, swing and jump—aside from that, it's all about timing. Sure, I love deep play mechanics, integrated story and complex battle engines, but there's still something to be said for good old pattern-based reflex action. The music in Coral Capers remains every bit as magical as it was the first time around, the new mini games are actually fun, you can now save anywhere, and Cranky's still the coolest ape on the planet.

play rating



Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow

*system: **gba** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami***

Some games you crave like nourishment, and I can find none more intoxicating than the Castlevania series. Borrowing many of the finer elements from Symphony of the Night—a few of the awesome boss encounters are even extensions of Konami's masterpiece—the elegantly titled Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow is the latest and one of the greatest. Rabid fans like myself will receive the game with absolute, welcome familiarity—item collection is as it always has been and as impactful than ever; castle structure follows the same compelling interconnected design approach; enemies, populating the enormous setting in huge abundance, carry the typically sensational gothic imagination; progression hinges on the incessantly engaging sword destruction and endless exploration. And call it basic, but the experience-point system is absolutely brilliant in its ability to tighten your bond to your vampire hunter, Adam.

Aria of Sorrow is as transfixing and hand-drawn inspired as any Castlevania before it, or any game for that matter, even if it does lose some of its hold on the handheld platform. Squinting at a tiny screen and absorbing antiquated music reproduction sucks, but the magnificent gameplay style and keen attention to every little touch this series is known for protect Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow from the weight of any of its inherent faults.

play rating

Army Men: Green's War

*system: **ps2, xbox, gc** / developer: **3DO** / publisher: **[illegible]***

The Army Men series continues to consistently improve, and now it's a little edgier, much grittier and little more violent to go along with the staple action. The game is still trademark Army Men clunky, but you can look past the sloppier qualities—it still smacks of low-key production value—and enjoy the ceaseless combat for its base appeal. Melting toy soldiers and blasting the miniature world to shreds maintains just enough energy to keep things fun, but if you need to appease the trigger finger even more, plenty of multiplayer missions round the light package.

play rating

Jurassic Park: Operation Genesis

*system: **ps2** / developer: **blue tongue** / publisher: **vivendi universal games***

If you like to sit down with a good simulation, I can't recommend JPOG highly enough. Aside from giving players a break from the rigors of management—the safaris, ranger copter and action-based mission ops are nicely integrated and good fun—the overall detail and systems at work are a testament to quality world-building design. The game is neither too easy nor overly frustrating, and the detail (you can actually zoom up and view guests individually and see what they're thinking) is remarkable. There's something so satisfying about hearing the chopper as those first guests arrive...time to raise the price on those chili fries! I am such a sucker for Jurassic Park. VU has spared no expense bringing the business of Jurassic

play rating

Day of Defeat

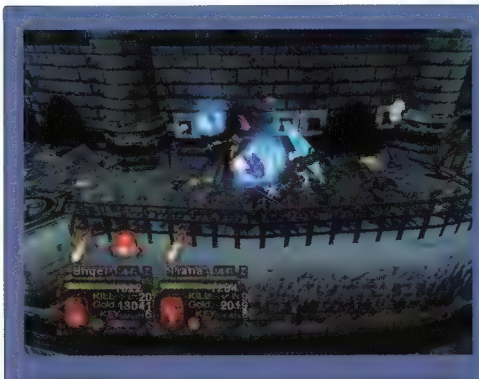
system: ***pc*** */ developer:* ***valve*** */ publisher:* ***activision***

Set in 1944, at the height of the war in Western Europe, Day of Defeat puts Axis and Allied troops against each other in all out war. Players take on the roles or classes ranging from your basic Rifleman and Sergeant to more specialized units such as a Sniper or Machine Gunner. Covering two types of gameplay—Territorial Control and Capture and Destroy the Objectives—both require incredible amounts of teamwork and tactics. But once you go online, the adrenaline rush is unsurpassed. Watch your six solider.

play rating ●●●●○

Unreal Gold

play rating ●●●◖○



Black Stone: Magic and Steel

play rating ●●●○○

Blazing Rear Extreme

system: ***xbox*** */ developer:* ***hudson*** */ publisher:* ***konami***

GG X2 and Soul Calibur II (I presume anyone into fighters owns an import copy by now) are all the fighting game I'll need for awhile—while on the American side I actually like Tao Feng (so sue me) and MK Deadly Alliance—so my dance card is full. For another to creep in it'd have to be pretty sexy. BRE comes close but I've been here and done that. While still nice-looking in the grand scheme of things, the technology is somewhat behind the times and I still have mixed feelings about "zoanthropes". BRE is decent in every way and the $29.99 price point makes it tempting, but it's up against impossible odds. I'm afraid of PETA anyway... I can't kick a rabbit's ass—Alicia Silverstone won't invite me to her Christmas party!

play rating ●●●○○

Conflict: Desert Storm

system: ***gamecube*** */ developer:* ***pivotal games*** */ publisher:* ***gotham games***

Military games are exhibiting surprise success over on Xbox and GameCube, and now it's time for the GameCube to finally tackle the genre with its latest in realism-based combat. Conflict: Desert Storm may be a port of an average game, but it arrives with some improvements. The action is entertaining and the depth of the play satisfying, benefiting from a good variety of squad-based missions through the dilapidated, war ravished cities and outlying desert wasteland—rescue soldiers, blow up bridges, confiscate sensitive materials. If this was simply a run-and-gun action game, Conflict: DS wouldn't survive its mediocre moments, but the presence of units of up to four who require steady management carry the game.

play rating ●●◖○○

system: **pc** / developer: **nova logic** / publisher: **nova logic**

Based loosely on the events that happened in late1993 and the movie of the same name, the relatively short single player game has players taking on the role of a Delta Force soldier in ten dangerous missions in Mogadishu Somalia. Sure its fun, but the true star of Black Hawk Down is the multiplayer, albeit a truly archaic server browser. Supporting up to 32 players online (and 50 over a LAN), the robust multiplayer mode has seven types of gameplay including the standard Deathmatch and Capture the Flag scenarios.

play rating ●●●◐

play rating ●●●●

system: **ps2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **genepool** / publisher: **activision**

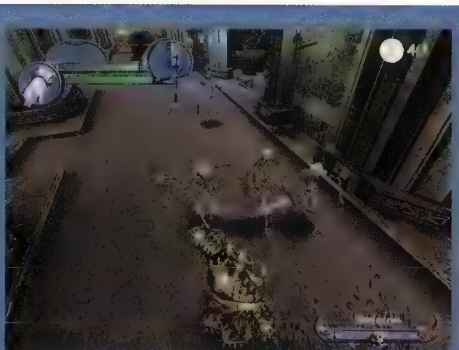
Sadly, the problems inherent in the preview version have made their way into the final game, which, as a result, doesn't live up to the namesake. There are some good ideas here, but the lack of detail, soft collision (Wolvie sinks ankle-high into any raised surface), murky control and low poly counts make Logan a dull boy. This is a perfect example of a game forced through the chute to hit before the movie; a couple more months of tweaking and the years of hard work could have amounted to a solid game. The stealth bits are nicely done, and the diverse play mechanics show they attempted to mold a great game, but in the end, WR pales in the wake of this year's stiff action/adventure competition.

play rating ●●◐

system: **gba** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami**

Konami's new original side scrolling masterpiece, Ninja Five-0, combines elements of Bionic Commando, Ninja Gaiden, Shinobi...and a little Spider-Man—hot-damn-dog!! The game is divided into missions—with multiple objectives like finding keys and freeing hostages in each—along with nimble ninja stealth and acrobatics, of which the beauty is in the execution. The levels are presented in layers rather than garden variety end-to-end side-scrolling, much like Bionic Commando, with doors that lead to separate room challenges, where you'll use ceiling swings, wire sneaks, arc slashes, shurikens, and whatever specials you've amassed avoiding bad guys and obstacles akin to classic Ninja Gaiden... SP love!

play rating ●●●●



play rating ●●●●◐

All hands on deck

Lost Kingdoms 2

words dave halverson

I haven't played a good card-battle RPG since Wolf Team's Fhey Area on Mega CD, always finding them overly lumbering and complex for what amounts to little pay-off in terms of pure gaming satisfaction. No matter how intrigued by a given universe I seem to be, unless I'm a card-carrying member of the cult, the ensuing game may as well be in hieroglyphics. Yu-Gi-Oh! was cool (as long as my 11-year-old cousin was phoning in in-depth game hints), but no such game has reached beyond the E market for as long as I can remember.

Although it had to grow on me, From Software's (yes, they've made a good game) Lost Kingdom II has finally managed to strike the right balance between managing a deck, real time gameplay and a universe that post-pubescent people can get behind.

Visually, the in-game models range from good to very good—nothing mind-blowing, but given the complexity of the battles and high concept, they more than carry the story, which chronicles the plight of Tara Grimface and her pilgrimage from a young abandoned girl with only a powerful Runestone to guide her to becoming a master of monsters. Tara's ability to control monsters is unequalled in the realm due to her pure Runestone, which, in turn, is sought after by Leod VIII, a freakish royal bent on overthrowing the ruling queen. Overall the story runs deep and unfolds through a mixture of captions, real-time cinema and scripted, event-driven cutscenes.

The decks are simple yet complex—easily discernible within an hour or two of gameplay. Summon cards launch grandiose one-hit attacks, transformation cards allow you to change form for a given task, independent creature cards spawn warriors that fight by your side, helper cards heal and assist, and weapon cards transmit attacks through the lead character. Each card has attributes specific to given enemies as well: fire conquers wood, ice over fire, etc. As well, using and shuffling is quick and easy and, should you fail at the end of a level by running out of cards or through mismanagement, the cards you collect to that point remain in your deck, as do certain achievements on each map, making do-overs quite painless—another card game Achilles' Heel. All of the action unfolds in real-time so Tara can be running and dispensing beasts simultaneously—doing anything from deploying mecha-catapults to healing, striking and spawning warriors all in seamless concert with a given fight.

The real surprise in LKII, however, lies in the environments, which look progressively more fantastic as the game develops, spanning far and wide without a hitch. From Software is famous for distance blurring and fog, yet neither rear their annoying heads the GameCube seems to suit the developer well. Compared to Murakumo, Evergrace and (gulp) King's Field... swooooooosh... Lost Kingdoms II is a revelation. It's also a GameCube exclusive action/RPG. Talk about a rare commodity.

FROM Software spared no expense detailing LK II's inner sanctums

"No matter how intrigued by a given universe I seem to be, unless I'm a card-carrying member of the cult, the ensuing game may as well be in hieroglyphics."

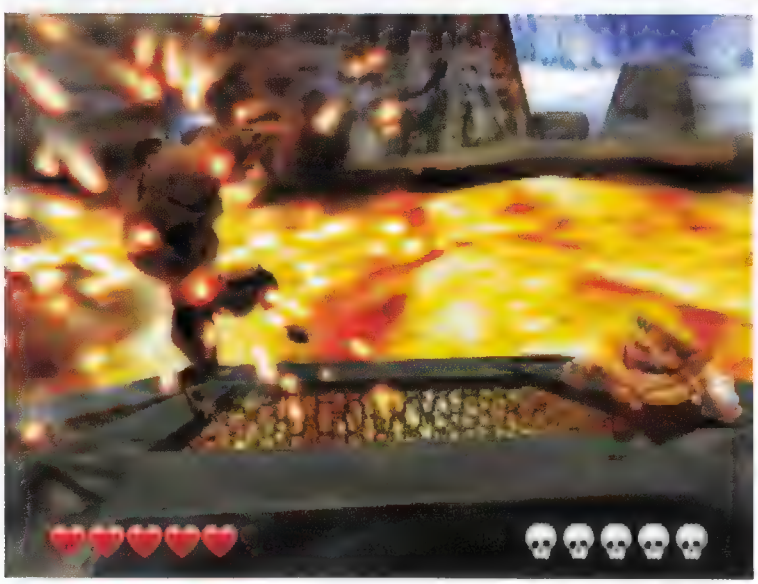
Lost Kingdoms II play rating

system: **gamecube** / developer: **from software** / publisher: **activision** / available: **now**

Greed is good

Wario World

words dave halverson



Wario gladly takes on one of Treasure's Trademark bosses. "I'm-a-gonna win!"

Treasure's first first-party Nintendo game, the hardware-defying platforming masterpiece Mischief Makers (developed for Nintendo via Enix), was of their own design, as was their second, Sin and Punishment, which stands as not only the best N64 game ever produced, but as one of the best action games ever made, period. Sin and Punishment also stands as their sole foray into 3D action (the mega-weird side-project/tech-demo Stretch Panic doesn't count); surprising given today's anti-2D climate.

Then again, Treasure has never followed trends. In fact, when asked to by Konami, the place they called home throughout the height of the 16-bit era (where they crafted gold like Axelay, TMNT and Contra), they said adios and struck out on their own.

Humble, understated, and comfortable in their skin, they've been doing as they please ever since, with no regard for status. They'll make a freak show one year you'd swear they made for kicks, followed by the pinnacle of precision shooting the next...you just never know what to expect. If, like me, you're a card-carrying fanboy for the likes of Gunstar and Guardian Heroes, Mischief Makers, Dynamite Headdy, Silhouette Mirage, and Sin and Punishment, this can drive you absolutely mad... On the other hand, when they do craft an action game, it makes it that much more of an event, and that's what Wario World is to me: an event. Platforming is where I live, and few do it as well as Treasure, let alone Treasure doing Nintendo.

This being their maiden first-party game based on a Nintendo brand, my hope was that the union would see them adopt some of the staples Miyamoto has instilled in his games – games that have helped make Nintendo the preeminent action game maker the world over – which it has, producing a hybrid first-party Nintendo game like no other.

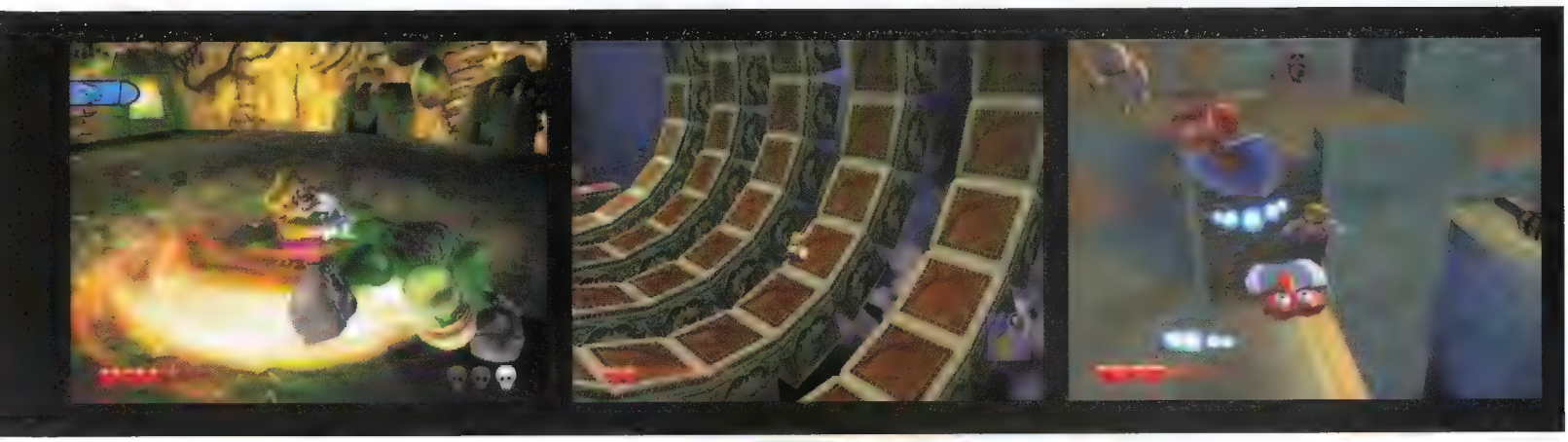
Wario World is about an evil black jewel that fed on people's despair, dispatching monsters and corruption, until a curious race of beings called Spritelings sealed it away. Of course, Wario steals it. Soon after, it commences sucking up all of the negativity and greed energy in Wario's castle (talk about your weapons of mass destruction), turning the place into spook central and scattering Wario's loot everywhere in the process. The goal in each of the four areas—Excitement Central, Spooktastic World, Thrillsville and Sparkleland (two levels and a boss each)—is to find enough red diamonds to power the doohickey to escape, beat the boss and find all of the treasure you can in the process.

You can beat a level by finding a minimum number of items, but like any great Nintendo game, beating it is one thing...turning it inside out is another. Within each level—presented in three-deep side-scrolling fashion—there lie several Treasure calling cards as well as one straight out of Mario Sunshine, only done even better; more on that later. Larger enemies can be knocked unconscious, grabbed and then spun; not spun like one-two-throw, but spun like a top via the Wild Swing-a-ding. Once Wario builds up a head of steam, which turns him blue, you can stop spinning the C-stick and use him like a whirling madman to flatten multiple enemies. "Have a nice day!" This technique is used to great effect throughout the game on everything from massive stone pillars and Wario heads to bosses. You can also piledrive larger enemies, Haggar-style, or chuck them with a super-charged throw to knock out living parts of the levels, like fire-breathing doors.

The other oft-used play mechanics are Wario's dash, a hilarious Dynamite Headdy-like vacuum head (to suck up money of course), a one-two-three punch and the crowd favorite Glue Globe shimmy, in which fatty Wario hugs and shimmies around big balls. One level in particular, Sparkle Mansion, is in essence a character, as Treasure show their mad skills using mirrors. This is why I live.

When Wario's not fighting, he's of course platforming. There are two types of rooms in which to score loot, accessible through two types of trap doors; one taking only a butt bounce to enter and the other a large enemy piledrive to plunge into. Easy doors, marked by bandages, lead to puzzle rooms that require Wario to finish a little action-puzzle to grab a red diamond and heart fragment. These grow more complex as the game carries on, but pose little challenge overall. The tough doors, however, lead to Treasure's version of the floating platform levels in Mario Sunshine, and if you know how much Treasure like to rotate blocks... These get insane by game's end and are simply too cool for words.

"Within each level—presented in three-deep side-scrolling fashion—there lie several Treasure calling cards as well as one straight out of Mario Sunshine"



Above: If it moves, Wario can spin it...Below: doing what he loves best; hording treasure!

Strewn throughout, little touches of Wario-ism abound: not only is he ever the waddling nasty man (he talks to you the whole game) we've come to know and love, but Treasure apply a thick coat of Wario nastiness to dying and continuing. When Wario dies on the surface, it costs him 50 coins (don't worry, you always have plenty) to continue (which you know he hates), but when he falls off the world, rather than costing energy, he lands in a pit where he must run on thin rails while being chased by nudging spooks until he finds the box with a spring in it to bounce back up. The thing is, the rails are surrounded by goop that costs him money when he touches it...now that's Wario hell.

Of course, all of this is done in the utmost jovial, frenetic, alive manner possible. Wario World is a bouncy, frolicky, happy game. There are trees to climb, graveyards to invade and all manner of interaction with the landscape to enjoy. The levels bustle with energy and movement, the control is perfect and trademark Nintendo music (siphoned through the Treasure mystique) abounds, creating an air of pure gaming satisfaction. Like all Treasure action games, Wario World is a symphony of movement, timing and dexterity, and in terms of architecture, it's a testament to the power of side-scrolling gameplay applied to a 3D universe. They start good, end up way past great, and along the way pay dividends few 3D games can muster.

The enemies in the game bear praise too. Like the levels, they build in stature as the game progresses and wear the unmistakable trademark Treasure expression. While they might seem simplistic on the surface, upon closer inspection, many possess fine detail. The sharks in Spooktastic World, for instance, shine in the moonlight when Wario catches them.

Saving the best for last, if you miss bosses—big Super Mario World-type bosses—you're going to love these. Treasure is already known for legendary (weird but legendary) boss encounters, but with the Miyamoto aesthetic applied to the Treasure whack factor, they're busted, they're weird, they're fun and some are even hard.

There are those who would say that I'm way too excited about a 10- to 20-hour-long action game that stars a fat, greedy, despicable, garlic-eating villain, but for someone who feeds off of the connection between game and player, the kind of connection that only the very best can forge, an hour of Wario is worth ten of a game that only pays off sporadically. Wario World pays off every second I'm holding the controller, and that, to me, is greatness.

Wario World

gamecube / de [illegible] treasure / [illegible]

play rating

Hate Boat

Resident Evil Dead Aim

words dave halverson

"We hammered a metal rod into the subject's frontal lobe in order to alleviate some of the pain. This was done only for humanitarian reasons. We have removed the eyeballs in order to observe its reactions to external stimulation." You'll only find lines like these in one place: Resident Evil. The subject in question, "alpha," a condemned criminal used for repulsive experimentation, is a massively obese, malformed, disgusting, blind freak that charges you based on sound while wailing a bone-chilling, brain-dead overture that could scare the brown off Mr. Hanky; he's but one of many new beasts bred for Resident Evil: Dead Aim. As Resident Evil seeps further into pop culture, spawning offshoots like rabbits, this is Capcom's most recent action-based foray into the stalwart but aging universe. What you won't find in Dead Aim—loading stairs and doors, overly complex riddles, tedious puzzles, massive backtracking and storage boxes—are things I personally never liked about the series (I know I'm alone on this so save your breath). What you will find is plenty of labyrinth-style gaming, bone-chilling sound effects, gore galore, finely tuned first-person shooting, amazing CG, stunning creature design and crazy detail.

The story chronicles the plight of Bruce McGivern, a government operative sent aboard a hijacked Umbrella Corporation cruise ship after a ruthless ex-Umbrella executive, Morpheus D. Duvall, sets sail from France with a dose of the T-virus. Joined by Fongling, a beautiful agent (and playable character) sent in by the Chinese, Bruce squares off in a game of cat and mouse that escalates into a political minefield under layers of brutal creature annihilation and a deep, integrated story that keeps you guessing until the bitter end. Duvall's ultimate goal, to lord over a kingdom of ghouls, has lead him down a dark path of experimentation that has spawned some of the most hideous creatures the series has ever rendered.

The gameplay unites action and shooting in seamless unison; the flick of the shoulder button giving you an instant gun sight to carefully pick off the top of zombified cruise-goers' skulls for the one-shot kill. As long as you're in the targeting mode, you can strafe in any direction and carefully aim your weapon of choice, prompted by left or right flashes warning of approaching enemies. Once they're dispatched, simply pressing forward to run returns you to the game's third-person perspective. With a controller in hand, this creates a vastly entertaining new way to hunt, while played with a GunCon, the adventuring is harder and the killing much easier.

Although certain key elements still apply, like limited ammo, lumbering zombies, an integrated plot that unfolds through discovery and the stock equip/status screen, the emphasis in Dead Aim is placed squarely on action and first-person shooting. There are mild puzzle elements and a fair amount of backtracking to be found, but for the most part, this is a search-and-destroy title blessed with Resident Evil level refinements. The detail is staggering: walls of complex toggle switches and gauges aren't merely textured, but painstakingly modeled. Even textured doors have depth, and the models across the board—along with the lighting and cinemas—are of the utmost quality. The game runs silent, accented only by trance-inducing save room music, perfect sound effects, the occasional movie and of course the ending, all of which exude the utmost polish and nearly incomparable style. Capcom are trimming everything these days with a layer of class that's hard to match. The only real drawback here is length. Your first time through on Easy or Normal, it's doable in well under four hours. Like most Capcom games, however, there are plenty of reasons to go back into hell again. These monsters and environments beg for an encore performance.

" ...a massively obese, malformed, disgusting, blind freak that charges you based on sound while wailing a bone-chilling, brain-dead overture that could scare the brown off Mr. Hanky."

Sin and punishment

Chaos Legion

words dave halverson

I'm seeing arcade-style games—only on a much grander scale—and I like it. One might deem Chaos Legion rudimentary in design and not be far from the truth. This game's strength lies in its heavily nuanced gameplay, integrated story, and its gloomy heretical aura, which drips dark Goth, steeped in pain and suffering. In other words, it's my kind of game. It's also beautiful beyond measure, with its towering cathedrals, chilling wastelands and dank inner sanctums.Based on the Japanese fantasy novel of the same name, Chaos Legion follows the plight of Sieg Wahrheit, a dark knight sent by the sacred Order of St. Overia—the ruling class of the church—to track down Victor Delacroix, a once holy man of the order suddenly consumed by darkness. After murdering Sir Clovis, a high-standing member of the Order, Delacroix steals a sacred tome, the Apocrypha of Yzark, leading to Sieg's pursuit by decree of the high priest. Hours pass before Sieg and Victor duel, which ends with Victor's lady, Seila, run through by Sieg's sword. Consumed by his pain, Victor chooses the path of a dark lord and ultimately plunges the world into darkness, decimating cities and killing without quarter, bent on bringing about the apocalypse of purification, offering Sieg as a sacrifice so that he may be reunited with Seila. To achieve his goal, Victor needs to control three dark glyphs: Ascension, Destruction and Primal Sin—forbidden ancient symbols capable of opening the gates of chaos and releasing the spirit of purification. Rather then kill Sieg, he has condemned him to be his pursuer. Along the way, Sieg meets Arcia, a Maiden of the Silver whose entire family has been slain by Delacroix. From that point, the plot thickens and twists like the trees of an ancient forest. You take control of Arcia in just such a place, which is when the game begins to come into its own.

If you guessed you'll be doing a lot of hacking and slashing in Chaos Legion, you're partially correct. However, you'll also be powering up, equipping, and mastering Legions that you acquire by obtaining crests at each episode's outset. Each Legion—born of attributes like guilt, hatred, malice, arrogance, blasphemy, etc.—has very specific attributes and abilities, from fierce melee capabilities to long-range targeting, as well as powers specific to organic or metallic enemies. Legions can be empowered to a frightening degree by assigning them points earned in battle (gauged on how well you've performed) or with items collected along the way. My crossbow-carrying force, Malice Legion, for instance, has grown from two to four and I have built them to a devastating degree to fight bosses from long range. They also grant Sieg the ability to electrically lasso far-off enemies for an initial sword crush in mid air, the beginning of a six-slash assault. With each Legion, of course, come play mechanics—set on active or passive, you command them like your own private army—deeply satisfying in battle since the

Check Sieg's cape and the state of that demon: polygonal art at its finest

enemy is designed to fall quickly if you've chosen wisely or pummel you like a rag doll if you're ill-equipped. The marriage of the two types of combat, coupled with creature designs and models as beautiful as you can possibly imagine, intertwined with gorgeous cinema, is enough make any action junkie sob tears of joy. Of course, massively populated battlefields covered with seamless models at a constant 60 fps do come at a price: the team uses soft blurring and white fog to alleviate any clipping (to great effect, I might add), and the environments, while beautiful, are straightforward in terms of architecture. All I can say about the music is "superb."

In between vast adventures and epic platformers, these are the types of games I like to spend time unearthing every inch of (which you are vastly rewarded for in this case, by the way). The return of the pure action game is indeed one of the fruits of this modern era in gaming. I hope it continues for many years to come.

"This game's strength lies in its heavily nuanced gameplay, integrated story, and its gloomy heretical aura."

Chaos Legion

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **now**

play rating

Car trouble

Burnout 2 Point of Impact

words dave halverson

You've just walked in the door after a long day that culminated in a two-hour drive in traffic that normally takes 20 minutes. You're spent, you're pissed, and you need the love only a console game can provide. There's no better time to fire up Burnout 2—a game where scaring the brown out of oncoming traffic and driving like a certifiable lunatic is the name of the game. Most know the aesthetic well by now: driving on the wrong side of the road and committing near misses (as well as hanging power slides) builds turbo; turbo of course provides boost, which you can in turn chain (provided you're a maniac) to provide a vein-popping surge of adrenaline as you streak down busy streets, passing cars like they're standing still. And should you crash, well, vehicular car-slaughter is half the fun. But you already own Burnout, so why delve into the sequel? Easy: Custom Series cars, the Xbox version's 21 additional skins, Pursuit Mode, Crash Mode, and a customizable soundtrack option that lets you throw down some hot Bee Gees action into the proceedings—a welcome feature since the music is the weakest part of the game. Making the leap from PS2 to Xbox, Criterion has made substantial improvements to the game. It's faster, and boosts are easier to amass, making the later levels and challenges a bit hairier than previous versions.

Visually, Criterion has gone completely mad, shoehorning entire cities, airports and back roads into full view. Beyond what's directly in front of you, the layers of urban sprawl stretch far and wide, providing a sense of realism that, at 60 fps, stands as the most impressive to date in a category that seems to be in a constant state of flux. Between Midnight Club, Need For Speed and Burnout, each game has carved out its own chunk of specialized content and it would seem that Criterion have once again thrown down the gauntlet. While I still don't think Burnout has the cool of MC (I'm a sucker for any measure of Neo Tokyo-ism) or the panache of Need For Speed, it certainly makes up for it in environments, control, depth and adrenaline-pump. Plus, the car models, especially on Xbox, are just wrong—I defy you to find a flaw in their execution.

Which game you choose from this ripest of genres will likely depend on your individual preference, although I'm inclined to believe that if this is the category you get up for, you really need—and probably own—all three. The only chips in B2's paint as far as I'm concerned are the kinder, gentler balance (I wasn't seriously challenged until I was pretty deep into the game) and the cars you're stuck with while leveling up, like "The Gangster." I'd like the ability to apply my newfound attributes to my chassis of choice. Otherwise, the game delivers on all fronts.

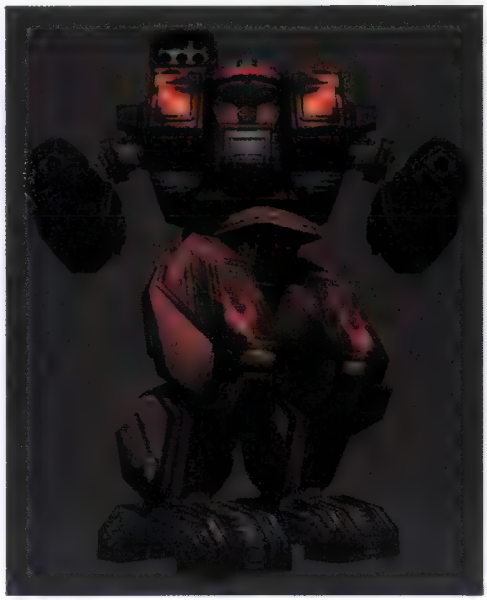
One of Burnout's amazing real time replays: Can it get any better than this?

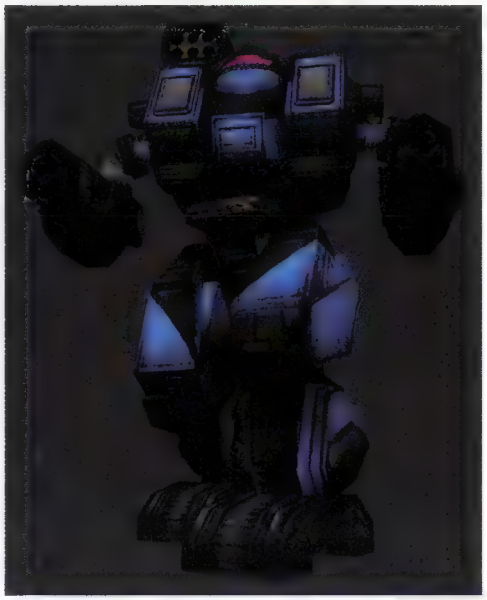
"Visually, Criterion has gone completely mad, shoehorning entire cities, airports and back roads into full view."

Burnout 2: Point of Impact

play rating ●●●●○

system: **xbox** / developer: **criterion** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **now**





New MechAssault content up!

As you read this, the MechAssault content we've all been waiting for should be available for download. That's right, Capture the Flag should be out now, so dust off that headset if you thought you had your fill of this game. But that's not all. There are two new mechs, Hellbringer and Loki, pictured above along with two new levels, Desert Storm and Midtown.

play online

Phantasy Star Online Episode 1&2

"Phantasy Star Online is a marvelous game, and the fact that it's not really changed on Xbox is irrelevant."

system: **xbox** / developer: **sonic team** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

I have never spent so much time with one game in my life. Thank you Sonic Team

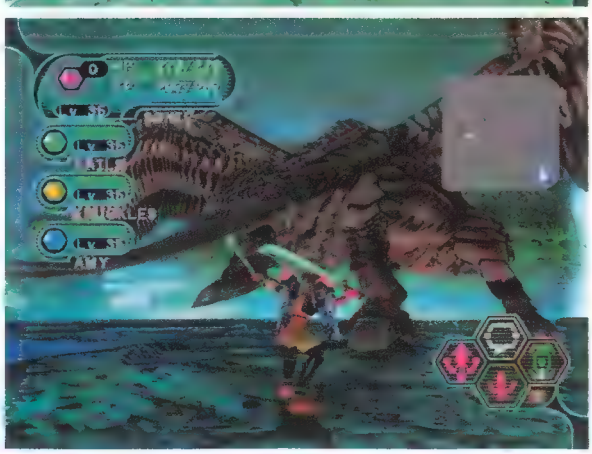
SONIC TEAM™

I am helpless in the face of Phantasy Star Online. I really liked the original (Episode 1) on Dreamcast, became obsessed with the game on Gamecube (Episode 1&2), and now, I find myself hoplessly addicted all over again on Xbox.

Why? Phantasy Star Online is simply a marvelous game. The fact that it's not really changed on Xbox since the recent Gamecube version is irrelevant to those that have never played it before. And even for those who have, like myself, it's amazing how addictive the game has become again because of the addition of voice chat. Before I played it on Xbox, I thought that I would dislike hearing the members of my team, thinking that I preferred the more charming and literary keyboard chatting of the previous versions. But I underestimated the appeal of keeping both hands on the controller and the inherent thrill of interacting more naturally and intensely with teammates.

So for those who haven't played it, what is the appeal of this game? It's many things. The graphics of Episode 1 look slightly archaic now, but there is no denying the strong appeal of the art direction and character design, and Episode 2's later levels are simply gorgeous, if basically identical to the GC version. Then there's the tight combat system, which has the addictive quality of a good action game, something Everquest can only dream about. But I guess the quality that drives the hundreds of hours I've put into the games is the basic addictiveness of leveling and searching for rare and awesome items. After you cross a certain threshold (around level 40), your character begins to feel very capable, and the game becomes more and more fun as the challenge level increases. Add to this the fun of Mag raising and new online quests and you have a recipe for pure obsession. I love this game. – *Mutsumi Yasuda*

play rating



The next big thing?

WWE Wrestlemania XIX

words chris hoffman

WWE Wrestlemania XIX could be the game to redefine wrestling on the GameCube. After last year's solid but ultimately shallow Wrestlemania X8, THQ and Yuke's are taking steps to make their sophomore GC offering something beyond just more of the same. The focus this year, according to associate producer Cory Ledesma, is "gameplay, gameplay, gameplay," and the result is a wrestling game that borrows the best ideas from X8, SmackDown, and N64 offerings like No Mercy, while adding in a more sim-like feel and some unique features of its own.

At the top of the list of enhancements is XIX's improved grapple system. Although you'll still be able to execute simple grapple moves from the ready position like in last year's version, a strong lock-up can now be triggered by holding down the grapple button, after which you'll be able to inflict pain with a variety of moves (a la Def Jam Vendetta). "We more than tripled the moves of what your superstar can do in X8," commented Ledesma.

The new special move system is also an amalgam: as in previous Yuke's games, players can build up power and store special moves for the opportune moment; however, as in Aki's games, activating special moves puts your character in a powered-up state for several seconds, during which players can apply their finishing moves (more than once if you have good skill and timing).

Other changes are less dramatic but no less appealing. Simple functions that have been ignored in other recent wrestling games, such as dragging opponents' bodies to position them for submission holds or pins, have been included here, as has the ability to draw blood from your opponent with weapon attacks and certain grapple moves. New injury animations have been added to show damage to various body parts, and the character roster, though not finalized at this time, has been updated with new faces like Rey Mysterio. Each character will also feature unique stats for strength, stamina, speed and submission skill, reflecting their TV personas.

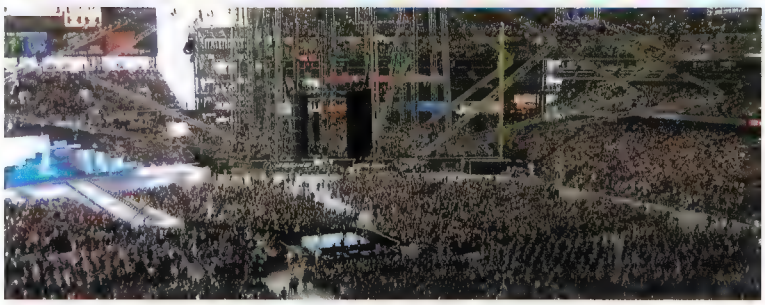
While the gameplay refinements are basically modifications of past wrestling games, the new story mode in Wrestlemania XIX is unlike anything that's been done before. "We wanted to do something a little different this year," said Ledesma in what can only be considered an understatement. Offering an adventure-like feel, this tentatively titled Revenge Mode features missions in real-world environments such as a construction site, parking lot, shipping harbor and shopping mall. Each venue reflects a different match style (the harbor is based on Hell in a Cell, for example), and each has you accomplishing multiple goals ranging from taking out a set number of hired goons to destroying WWE owner Vince McMahon's property. If you've ever dreamed of being Kurt Angle as he throws security guards off ledges, this is the mode for you (and, incidentally, you probably need therapy). For the more traditional wrestling fan, however, there are plenty of typical modes like tag team, triple threat, steel cage, ladder and hardcore matches, as well as King of the Ring tournaments where you can battle for championship belts.

Wrestlemania XIX is walking an unusual path between old and new, blending its hardcore sim elements with the zany new story mode. Hopefully it will come together to create the next hot ticket for wrestling fans.

"After last year's solid but ultimately shallow Wrestlemania X8, THQ and Yuke's are taking steps to make their sophomore GC offering something beyond just more of the same."

WWE Wrestlemania XIX

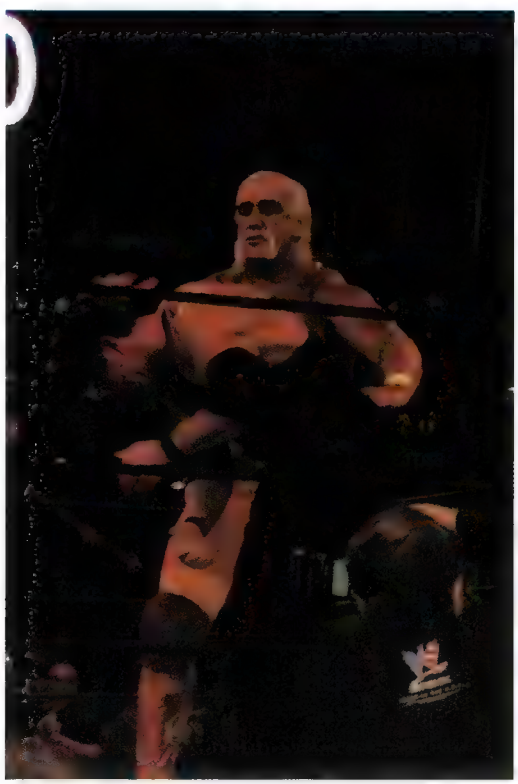
system: **gamecube** / developer: **yukes** / publisher: **thq** / available: **august**



Wrestlemania XIX

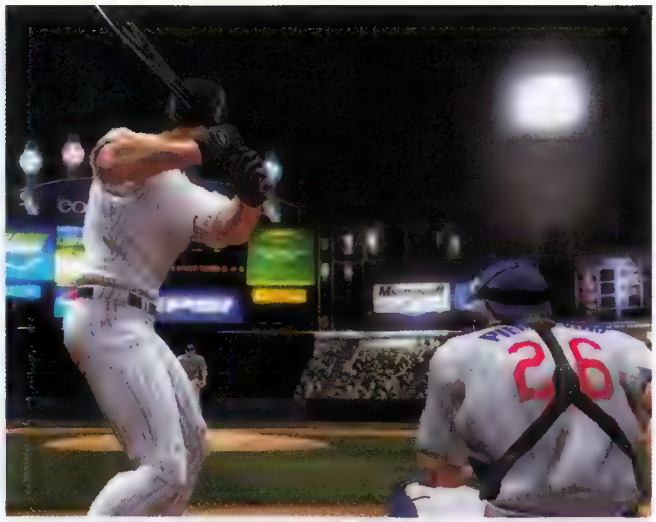
March 30 at Safeco Field

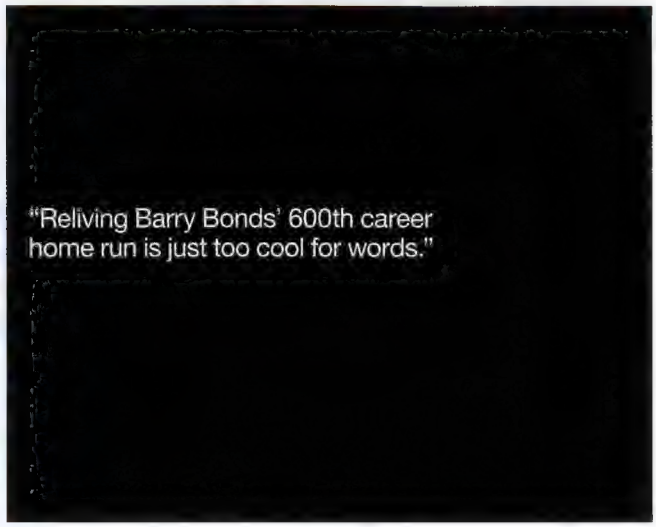
photos tom hum



Inside Pitch 2003

The rookie steps up to the plate





words tom ham

First-party sports games from Microsoft have always been a mixed bag. Where they excel in some areas, others fall by the wayside. Unfortunately for Microsoft, their latest baseball title continues this trend. Inside Pitch 2003 is Microsoft's inaugural baseball game for the Xbox and while it has a plethora of features and options, it's still lacking in many areas. Noticeably absent from Inside Pitch 2003 is any sort of Franchise or Dynasty mode—a staple of any good baseball game. There is a Create-A-Player mode and a pretty cool Training Tracks mode, but omitting this sort of thing is really unacceptable. On the flip side, an excellent feature is the Championship Challenge. Here players are placed in some of the most nail-biting scenarios of 2002. Reliving Barry Bonds' 600th career home run is just too cool for words. The batting and pitching interfaces are reminiscent of the High Heat Baseball games: nothing too flashy or complicated, but they get the job done. However, a major flaw with the pitching is the inability to change the style of pitch once you've selected it. Fielding for the most part is pretty solid. The AI players responded with a good amount of quickness and smarts.

Graphically, Inside Pitch 2003 shows promise. Granted the players are a little too cartoonish for my tastes, but the uniforms and stadiums are incredibly well done. Some of the throwing animations could've used a once over, but for the most part, the game handles the visuals admirably. The big plus is that it's the only baseball game that can be played on Xbox Live. Aside from a slight drop in framerate and some delayed reactions while playing, I was very impressed with the online experience. But the coolest feature here is the ability to have your own customized music in the game. Utilizing existing sound libraries on your Xbox, you can pick which songs will be played in between innings and batters. What's cool is that the developers managed to recreate that echoic sensation with the music. Although it's a good beginning, they have a long way to go before they can start playing ball with the big boys.

It ain't the best of what's out there, but the game looks good

Inside Pitch 2003

system: **xbox** / developer: **microsoft** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **now**

play rating

NCAA Football 2004

"For 2004, EA is bringing back the spirit and pageantry of college football."

system: **ps2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **electronics art tiburon** / publisher: **ea sports** / available: **july**

Just gettin' better every time...

Refusing to rest on their laurels, EA Sports is poised again to dominate the college football arena with their latest, NCAA Football 2004. Having the best college football in town last year puts a lot of pressure on the developers and after playing a preview rev of this year's game, it's pretty obvious that EA Tiburon is ready to bring it on again. For 2004, EA is bringing back the spirit and pageantry of college football. In addition to 150 new teams this year (including 36 new 1-AA schools), there are over 100 Classic teams. Teams like 1924 Notre Dame and '47 Michigan and '59 Syracuse. And to commemorate these historical teams, EA Tiburon has added four different historic player models – complete with leather helmets with no facemasks. Talk about pain! To further incorporate the college atmosphere, EA Tiburon has added 20 new mascots, cheerleaders waving flags and cannons firing. New on-field celebrations include crowds storming the field and our favorite, tearing down the goalposts. But the biggest addition to this year's game comes by way of online gameplay on the PlayStation 2. Players will now be able to create up to four EA Sports user names and use Messenger features that include Buddy Lists, Chat and Message Tracker. With an optional headset, players will be able to chat online while playing their game. In addition, players will be able to track online performance with Online Top 100 and stat leaders. Gameplay is excellent, even for a preview build. AI was always a strong point with the series and this year, EA Tiburon has improved kick off and punt return coverage as well as the bump and run and zone coverage. New trick plays like the Halfback Throwback and Wide Receiver Double Reverse have also made into the mix. With features and options like these, you gotta wonder, how can anyone else compete? Look for our complete review of NCAA Football 2004 in our next issue.

Outlaw Volleyball

"Playing Outlaw Volleyball is a lot like hanging out at Hooters."

system: **xbox** / developer: **hypnotix** / publisher: **simon and schuster interactive** / available: **now**

Close your eyes if you're under the age of 18

Playing Outlaw Volleyball is a lot like hanging out at Hooters—a host of shady characters milling about and lots of big-breasted women to look at. Going in the complete opposite direction from Tecmo's DOAX Beach Volleyball is Outlaw Volleyball from Simon and Schuster Interactive. With a cast of 16 characters that would fit right in on Jerry Springer, 10 outrageous locales and Xbox Live gameplay, Outlaw Volleyball manages to deliver a pretty decent sports game that doesn't take itself too seriously. Similar to last year's Outlaw Golf, Outlaw Volleyball prides itself on dirty (and at times perverted) humor and crazy antics. Have you ever played a volleyball game where you can pick a fight with another player? Didn't think so. The heart of the game revolves around Tour mode. Here players go around to the various locales to defeat the home team. As you progress, cool items become unlocked such as bikini bottoms, tops and other characters. There are eight men and eight women players, including six players from Outlaw Golf. Though each character has their own unique personality and their share of smart remarks, for the most part it falls a little on the cheesy side. Aside from a few camera issues, Outlaw Volleyball plays incredibly well. Unlike DOAX where it was all about timing, Outlaw Volleyball relies on position and aiming as well. Setting the ball, power spikes, volleys and blocks—all the requisite volleyball moves are very easy to execute in the game making the game accessible to almost anyone. Giving the game substantial replayability is the online functionality via Xbox Live. Up to four players (2 per side) can play at once. So whether you're a big fan of the sport of volleyball or a just a big fan of thongs, there is probably something for you with Outlaw Volleyball.

play rating

BIO SCAN
STATUS:
SCAN COMPLETED
GEOMETRIC BODY-TYPE MATCHED
KINETIC TARGETS MATCHED
KIT SCAN COMPLETED
MOTION
3D noah brewer

The Anatomy of a Movie Game

Movie games are an interesting breed that live somewhat outside the parameters of standard video-game design and development since there are so many variables to consider: working with and portraying actors, dealing with film producers and/or touchy licensing and franchise issues, keeping plot points a secret, limited development time to hit with the film, budget (considering royalties and celeb salaries)...the list goes on and on. On the other hand, the story, general designs, universe and characters are predetermined and you're dealing with a built-in and potentially large demographic—so, there are big benefits. That said, movie games have, for some time, been hit-and-miss propositions, although a trend of quality seems to be emerging. Movie and TV games of late have ranged from good to great, sometimes far exceeding expectations. So the question is: what is the secret to making a great movie game, what are the pitfalls, and why are we seeing this emerging trend of quality? Has gaming finally risen to the challenge of true synergy with the film industry?

Jeff Barnhart, Producer Universal Interactive, The Hulk

The key to making a great movie game is the same as making a great game. This is the simple fact that the game must be fun. Every single game mechanic that the player is designed to act out in the game must be fun to do—this is the backbone of the game, everything else is a bonus. I think that movie games in the past have been designed with the primary goal of re-creating the movie experience, and that's where the focus is. This leaves the gamer out in the cold. Our goal in The Hulk was to create a fantastic experience that would stand alone as a must-have game regardless of whether there was a movie tied to it or not. At the same time, we had the advantage of being on the movie lot and getting direct access to early scripts, concept art, story boards, contact with ILM and art directors, set access, etc. This allowed our designers and artists to weave the film into the game process from day one. This is another big advantage because we don't have to hold off on development while we wait for assets, and lose valuable time.

Working on The Hulk, I have realized that when making a game based off of a movie like this, you actually get an advantage because some of the characters that are designed for movies make some of the best-designed video game characters ever. The abilities that Hulk has been designed to have encompass just about everything a player would want to have access to with his size, strength, rage, regeneration and even his ability to transform into an intelligent scientist. It gives us a large palette to work with, and allows us to create many different playable objectives across the game and within a single level. This variety in gameplay keeps gamers guessing at what's next, and has them constantly figuring out new strategies for getting past objectives. In the old days, beating up villain after villain would get boring really quick.

Patrik McCormack, producer of Alias, working out of Acclaim Studio Cheltenham

More and more attention is being given to cinematic gaming due to the exponential technological growth that gaming has undergone in recent years.
The cohesion of movies, television and video games will continue to unite as the game industry fosters a development process very similar to that seen in the film industry, including storyboards, cutscene scripts, camera movement, lighting and motion capture.

There are huge benefits to be taken from developing a video game based on a film or TV show. Instant reference is a huge benefit to any development team, with a definitive direction and strong style guide all being gained immediately, avoiding the laborious, time consuming and often frustrating process of conception. Gaining reference has these obvious benefits, yet taking it a step further, stunning results can be gained from high quality photo-imagery of a cast or scenery backdrop.

The organization and preparation of any motion capture shoot can be a daunting prospect and a time-consuming process, yet the use of the show's cast can achieve great results; for example, Sydney Bristow, the lead character in the Alias TV show, is trained in a form of martial arts know as Krav Maga. Obviously we wanted to emulate this cool-looking combat style for the game, so we hired specialists to perform comprehensive hand-to-hand combat moves with amazing results. We also took painstaking lengths to emulate Sydney's general grace and posture, whilst capturing her various behavioral nuances.

Using scriptwriters that have written for your game's show or movie can be a huge bonus. This will obviously have an instant knowledge of intriguing and twisting plot lines congruent to the show, plus great characterization and superb dialogue that will all give your game that significant edge. Plus, using the official scriptwriters means the game can be tied into the movie or show at the source, giving it more official status and authentic feeling.

Once the dialogue scripts have been written, having the cast from the show deliver voice-over for the game will bring delight to everyone. Casting voice-over artists who can instantly get into character can sometimes be a hit and miss affair. However, having the cast from the show, fully versed in your character's role, will give instant reward and success.

Having got your final version of the cutscene scripts created by the screenwriters, production of cutscene cinematics can begin. Again, reference to camera use and movement can all be emulated from screen to game. We have always tried to stay faithful to the Alias TV show, so presentation of the show permeates into what is shown in the game. Having said that, we decided to use other camera techniques used in other TV and movie productions such as picture-in-picture and split-screen cameras to create tense time-pressure cinematics, realized in film-like form.

Features from a movie or TV show can translate to game superbly—take the gadgets from Alias for example. Whilst we got a huge kick out of using their state-of-the-art gadgets, we just couldn't resist innovating our own. Costume disguises, too, feature heavily in the show, and form an integral part of the game.

Audio is another area where basing it on a movie can be a huge benefit; even if the film's assets are not used, instant reference can be achieved.

Developing video games tied into a TV show or movie license does have its hazards, however. There are many caveats and dependencies that can prolong turnaround times, affect schedules and even constrain gameplay. Game constraints are a development team's worse nightmare as creativity often gets stifled and innovation repressed. Parameters, therefore, need to be established early on, so it is clear what can or cannot be achieved. In addition, the greatest potential problem is that the movie or TV content may change as their production progresses, which can impact on game development work that has already been completed. Also, some publishers may not pick up the rights to a movie until it is already healthily underway, which in turn can cause a shortened development cycle and result in a lower-quality product.

Approval from the licensor is another of the biggest potential pitfalls. If the licensor does not like or agree on the game's characters, for instance, it may mean it's back to the drawing board for your artists. Being dependent on the licensor is a huge area for concern, particularly when so many of the game's critical elements are being governed by the company.

There are other potential issues too: cast availability may be reduced due to cast commitments to other projects, screenwriters creating a game's scripts need to be aware of the practical limitations of game development and what translates to a great game experience, schedules can be greatly impacted due to TV season or movie release tie-ins. Those are a few issues.

On the commercial side, the potential for cooperative marketing and PR efforts can be a major boost for a game's reach into the mass market audience and can break a movie into other areas of commercial opportunity where it would not have reached without a game.

It is pretty clear that the potential benefits of developing a video game based on a TV show or movie far outweigh the disadvantages where production is concerned, though.

Convergence of film and video game will continue to grow, that much is certain. The stakes get higher and higher each year as technology develops and developers gain a better understanding on what translates well from screen to game. Developers are only just starting to get the formula right; however, we must not lose sight of the very essence of creating a truly great game which has been used to great success in the past, a long time before film and games were even uttered in the same sentence.

Gregory John, senior producer, Treyarch (Spider-Man, Minority Report)

I think the secret to making a great movie game is to firmly ground the project in the idea that it is first and foremost a game. Within the context of characters and story, the creative forces need to determine what the central elements of gameplay will be. Once the gameplay elements are established, then you can come up with movie-inspired environments, and within those environments, populate it with movie-inspired characters. Depending on the movie plot, the game may require additional gameplay storylines.

The pitfalls generally fall within the category of license

approvals if a good relationship is not established. With a good working relationship with a licensor, one can minimize the potential negative impacts by constant coordination with the movie company. A good working relationship can definitely maximize the value of the license by creating a very strong tie between the movie and the game.

The tendency is now to simultaneously release the game with the movie, which is ideal for marketing the game, but a lot of prior planning is necessary since games usually take longer to make (from start to finish) than movies. So, another secret is to make sure you don't shortchange the game by not giving the project enough time.

Dave Perry, president, Shiny Entertainment

There are several ways to make a movie game.

Method #1

Joe Developer does a deal with a big movie company to buy the name of the movie they think would make a rockin' game. "We want to make…Alien, the game!" They tell all their developer friends that they got the rights to something great, their friends working on Barbie Fashion Designer #2 are all jealous. Life couldn't get any better? Later, they get back to their studio to start work and discover that (after asking for assets) they are told "No" on everything. They're not allowed to use any of the actors, any of the music, key phrases or any footage from the movie. Basically, they just bought the name of the movie for a limited time. No wonder gamers complain! However, when you're cursing this poor developer, you gotta understand that they were not allowed to make the game just like the movie! Even when the developer realizes their game is pooh, when they realize they need help from the studio, they are screwed. They learn that old movie people that have never experienced a video game in their life could care less about the experience the game buyer will have. So simply put, Method #1 is a pain in the ass for the developer and makes gamers want to burn them at the stake.

Method #2

You do a deal with the movie company, you get the rights to the name of the movie license and main movie character (like James Bond or Die Hard), but not the story of the movie that made you love the character. Hmmm. So now Joe Developer has to write their own story script. You ask yourself (being the one shelling out the cash), how many developers have fulltime A+ writers on staff? The answer would be .01 percent. Actually, I can't think of any, but there must be one. So who the heck will write this thing? That's when most developers turn and look at their designer (who has zero experience at writing scripts) and, yep, you guessed it, the designer just became a designer/writer. While Method #2 generally ends up in really average storytelling, some studios are now realizing they can contract in writing talent and so I expect stories to start getting better soon. (Fingers crossed. If not, **play** magazine promises to print the contact info for the writers agencies!)

Method #3

You do a deal with the movie company, you get the rights to the movie! Yeah! Erm, well not the whole movie, but some key bits! Damn... Close but no cigar. It's like watching an old broken movie. A movie you know, but they are not allowed to show it all linked. So it's just random scenes that the game developer liked and the rest is left up to your memory. It's definitely much better than Method #1 or Method #2, but it ends up with you feeling kinda lost for words. I guess the game did what it needed to, unless they missed one of your favorite bits.

Method #4

You do a deal with the movie company, you get the rights to the movie and all of the fantastic new special edition extra footage that they were planning to release on DVD. The movie people decided that the game was way more important than their quick and easy DVD sales, so they gave all these assets just so the game players of the world could enjoy them. Hold on, I can't think of a single game that has done this. Oh well, forget Method #4.

Method #5

You do a deal with the movie people and the movie company signs over everything. You can use the actors, the movie footage in any way you like, the plot, the story, the music...you get it all, baby... Yeah, you can even use words like "baby" cuz now you're part of Hollywood. Even the actors will come to your press conferences. They give you a T-shirt that has the movie name on it with CREW written on the back and yep, you guessed it, when you get back to the office, they mailed you one of those authentic director's chairs with your name on the back! It's the Holy Grail of making movie games. It's really tough to get to, but with the right attorneys and a ton of money, you can make this happen. The game won't have anything new in it, but the developer got to hang out with the stars!

Method #6

The movie people decide to make the movie-game without the help of talented video game developers as they figure that the movie is way more important than the game. This was a major trend in the mid-1990s, a time that, if Goldeneye had not been made, I think gamers would have been waiting by the giant gates of the movie studios with clubs in their hands. Thankfully, gamers taught these people a lesson by making the movie studio games of the mid '90s bomb like a…like a…like a…3DO console did.

Method #7

The directors of the movie are gamers. They decide to expand their story and write new compelling footage just for the video game. They then direct all the same crew, all the same actors, and make this brand-new never-seen-before footage of the exact same quality as the original movie. On top of that, they bring in all their best special effects people and stunt people to make sure that every single aspect of the game gets the loving treatment that the movie would get. Then all the movie stars support the game and the directors put their name on the front of the box, proud to be a part of making games better. (Personally I would hope this will be the trend of the future. Then I can play a Star Wars game that gets the royal treatment of having George Lucas himself working day after day on making something new and special, just for us gamers!)

So I see seven ways to do it. Which would you prefer? How many games can you name that did it the way that you prefer? That's the problem. Times are changing and movie games are going to start to get a lot better, mark my words.

From James Goddard: Producer, The Collective (Buffy, Indiana Jones)

Movie/TV games are not exempt from what it takes to attempt to make a great game of any kind. You must have a kick-ass set of game mechanics, a great cast/art/story and so on. What's tough is converting a license's strengths into addicting game mechanics, the true heart of any great game. What's nuts is how easy it is to overlook the importance of this and how hard it is to get it right. The public knows how your universe and character should be, so you have to nail it, but here is my personal spin on where things go wrong or right: if you think it is a slam dunk to just meet the public's expectations, then you are DOA, and I don't mean the fighting game! Why? The player goes "Ok, good, I've seen this before," then they look to be taken somewhere new. You must manage nailing the prime expectations and then spend most of your time going way beyond them, hitting the player with surprise in-game action (relying on cutscenes does not cut it), doing the things that are hardest about the license, that no one would think a game could do. Then, you must round it all out with the more subtle mechanics that are easy to overlook, especially the ones that are subconscious to the player.

All that is great in theory, but does the movie/TV license really play to your team's talents and technology? It is so easy to be greedy and jump on a phat license assuming you can do a great job. You can work hard to make it fit, but let me put it this way: if you are a singer, you need to pick the songs that fit your range, otherwise it is three minutes of pain as bad as any we have seen on *American Idol*. In the game production world that can translate into 1.5+ years and multi-million dollars of agony! Not to mention Little Jimmy's tears when he gets his favorite movie/TV show game and figures out it is complete crap—it's not like he can see an ESRB rating that covers TIB (Turd In Box)! This is so critical for any type of game! I focus on fighting-based products, so you won't be seeing me do something like "Sherlock Holmes and the Kooky Puzzle Box"! Ok, I might consider "Sherlock Holmes and Nutty Nun-chucks"…LOL!

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play anime

Monster's ball

Dragon Ball The Path To Power

words dave halverson

"The animation is glorious. Yes, you heard right."

Dragon Ball: The Path To Power

studio: **funimation productions** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **82 minutes**

play rating

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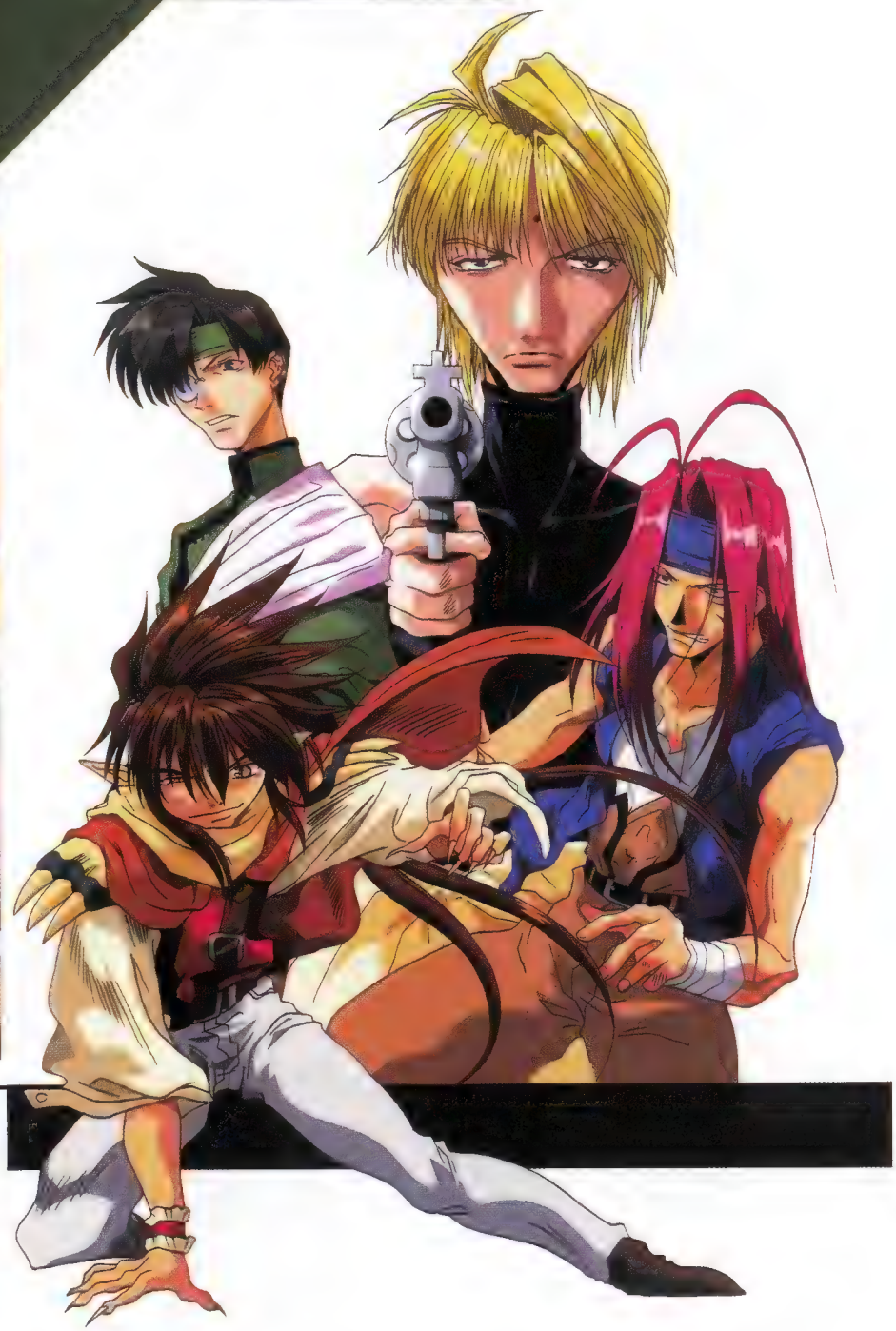
Bullet proof monk

Saiyuki

words dave halverson



In the hit-and-miss game of formulaic pilgrimage-style anime—which are in no short supply—*Saiyuki* blazes its own unique trail due to an extremely liberal dub, its distinct characters and a double dose of pedigree pumpitude: it's based on actual ancient Chinese folklore (the same story that inspired *Dragon Ball*) and is produced by TV Tokyo of *Noir* and *Fushigi Yugi* fame.

Now, about that dub. I was truly taken aback by the liberties ADV took with the script, its unabashed modern slang strewn about like TRL uncensored, to the extent it actually changes the relationships between characters. It's like, instead of saying, "Okay, what works here?" they just said "Fug it. What would they say today, or, moreover, what would be really funny?" The end result is surprisingly jiggy and at the same time somewhat detestable—making me feel all the more guilty for actually liking it...doh! I mean, this is what every otaku fears, but it may just be the only way to get regular people to really dig the anime. Hey, as long as the subtitles and Japanese dialogue are intact, what's the harm?

The story? Think Bloody Roar on a massive scale. Saiyuki takes place in the land of Shangri-La where humans and demons once co-existed peacefully. A recent rash of demon outbreaks (they've started eating folks) prompts the elders to recruit super-monk Genjo Sanzo and his band of the hand to set out for India to find the source of the evil responsible for rocking the cosmic casaba. Team Sanzo is indeed one of the more entertaining foursomes to come along in some time.

To set the stage, demons must wear limiters to keep their bestiality in check, otherwise their animal instincts get the best of them, which isn't pretty (much to my liking). Goku, a young demon rescued by Sanzo years prior, provides the bulk of the comedy: he's misguided, foul-mouthed, short and a total pig. The polar opposite is Gojyo, a chain-smoking demon/human hybrid who likes nothing more than giving Goku mountains of crappola. Then there's Hakkai, the gentle, wise, mothering-type demon, who does his best to keep the others in check while providing Sanzo someone sane to talk to. Meanwhile, Sanzo—the leader and sole human of the gang—is as irreverent a monk as you can possibly imagine. He smokes, drinks, gambles, likes the ladies and can take a savage beating. The thing is, when these guys spring into action, all bets are off—they're as lethal as they are dysfunctional. If volume one is any indication, at the very least Saiyuki is going to be hella good times. It's funny, well paced and great looking due to some clever techniques using silhouettes and line screens. I highly recommend getting down with this sickness.

> "The end result is surprisingly jiggy and at the same time somewhat detestable—making me feel all the more guilty for actually liking it..."

Saiyuki: The Journey Beings vol.1

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

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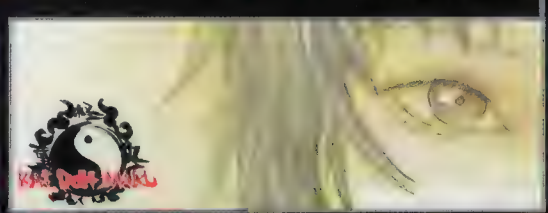


KAI DOH MARU

NINJA SCROLL 10TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EDITION

Poetry in motion

Kai Doh Maru

words dave halverson

Production I.G slew all comers with *Blood: The Last Vampire*'s awe-inspiring full digital animation, while the common thread among its viewers remained constant: although oh-so-sweet, it was too short, leaving us wanting more, which seems doubtful given the word "last" in the title. Nevertheless, what really made *Blood*'s simple tale so alluring was Production I.G's amazing cinematography and digital technique, which I'm happy to say has only gotten better, if not more abstract, with time. The wait for more, by anime standards, was relatively short, as is this second taste—although I must admit, it's just as sweet.

That said, Kai Doh Maru is not for everybody; it's very much an art piece. Set in the Hein era, awash with traditional architecture and bamboo bushes, it's a subtle, understated tale marked by bouts of unspeakable malevolence, chronicling the bittersweet tale of "The Four Knights" who work under general Minamoto-no-Raikoh. One of said knights is Kaidohmaru, a girl whose troubled youth and birthright brings her into the company of high-ranking warriors and monks. Raised like a boy, she fights like a boy, but has the sensibilities of a woman far more advanced than her years would let on as we come to know her. As the past we glimpse initially fades slowly into view, Kai Doh Maru's minefield of realization slowly draws you in, then culminates by disappearing in the blink of an eye in a single moment of clarity. Production I.G seem to be making a habit of this.

Once again, the digital animation is stunning, taken to extremes that give subtlety and warmth to the technology. The animation begins in delicate gray and white, awash with nervous ersatz line shading, and then slowly melts into the subtle colored hues it ultimately exists in—a wonder to behold, which possesses layers in both the visual presentation and story that demand repeated viewing. One of these a year I can definitely get used to.

"Kai Doh Maru is not for everybody; it's very much an art piece."

Kai Doh Maru

studio: **manga entertainment** / rating: **17 & up** / running time: **68 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

For gods and country

Neoranga

words dave halverson

Why is it that regardless of their objective, every monster spawned on an island off the coast of Japan finds it necessary to walk directly through the center of Tokyo, obliterating everything in its path, when it eventually comes ashore? You'd think that by now they'd have built a really wide street lined with giant mech treats or something, running straight through the city. But here comes Neo Ranga, voodoo mecha, the Shamu of Eva-like giant robots. Run for your damn life.

The biggest thing to wash up in Japan since Godzilla is looking for its posse, the Shimabara family: Minami, Ushio and Yuuhi—three sisters who couldn't be any more different if they were bred apart. Minami is a minimalist, efficient and organized; Ushio, honorable and kind-hearted; and Yuuhi, the youngest, is just odd: she's dark, pensive, and wears expensive lingerie given to her by anonymous men. The girls are trying to cope with life after the loss of their parents and brother when all hell breaks loose, then we digress. Little do they know that the giant that's mowing through Tokyo, Neo Ranga, is there for them.

Neo Ranga: A God is Risen is told in eight 15-minute episodes centered on the gentle giant's cataclysmic arrival and how it impacts each sister; it runs in back-to-front fashion, flashing back to a nephew they never knew and a pilgrimage to the free island his dad (their brother) once ruled, of which the sisters are now the royal family. How these three queens handle their newfound power will surely equate to six enigmatic volumes of anime goodness.

Neo Ranga has a quality about it that's hard to put your finger on. The half-episodes make it easy to absorb and work extremely well given the complexity of the story and its many characters, which may otherwise become convoluted. The story segues quickly, never staying in one place too long, and does a nice job juggling drama, comedy and the absurd, with an understated sense of mystery and intrigue you can feel bubbling under the surface. That Neo Ranga will blossom into revelations akin to *Evangelion* is doubtful, but it seems ripe to blossom in its own way. When the powers that be decide to exploit it rather than obliterate it, things certainly get interesting. Neo Ranga itself is almost child-like in its awesomeness, radiating subtleties from each girl as they connect; you can't help but think it serves a higher purpose, its eyes seeping with unimaginable wisdom. There's a little Eva in here, a little Argentosoma, and enough fizz of its own to make you want to fill out that lovely red box.

"*Neo Ranga* has a quality about it that's hard to put your finger on."

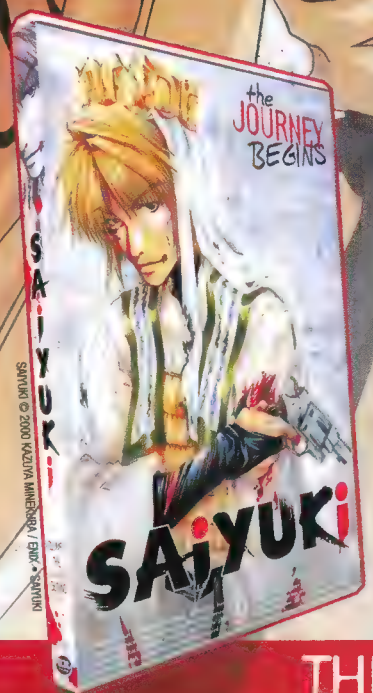
Neoranga: A God Is Risen vol.1

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating

JOURNEY
TO A WORLD OF
ANCIENT SORCERY,
ENCHANTING BEAUTY
AND ULTIMATE
DANGER.

SAiYUKi



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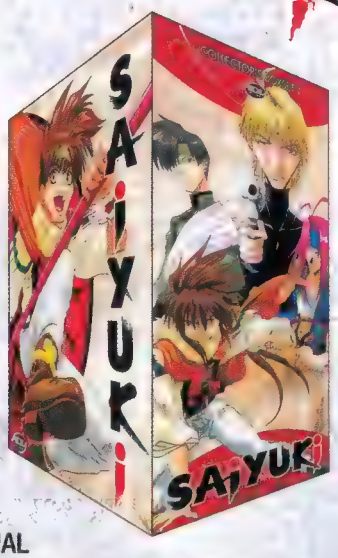

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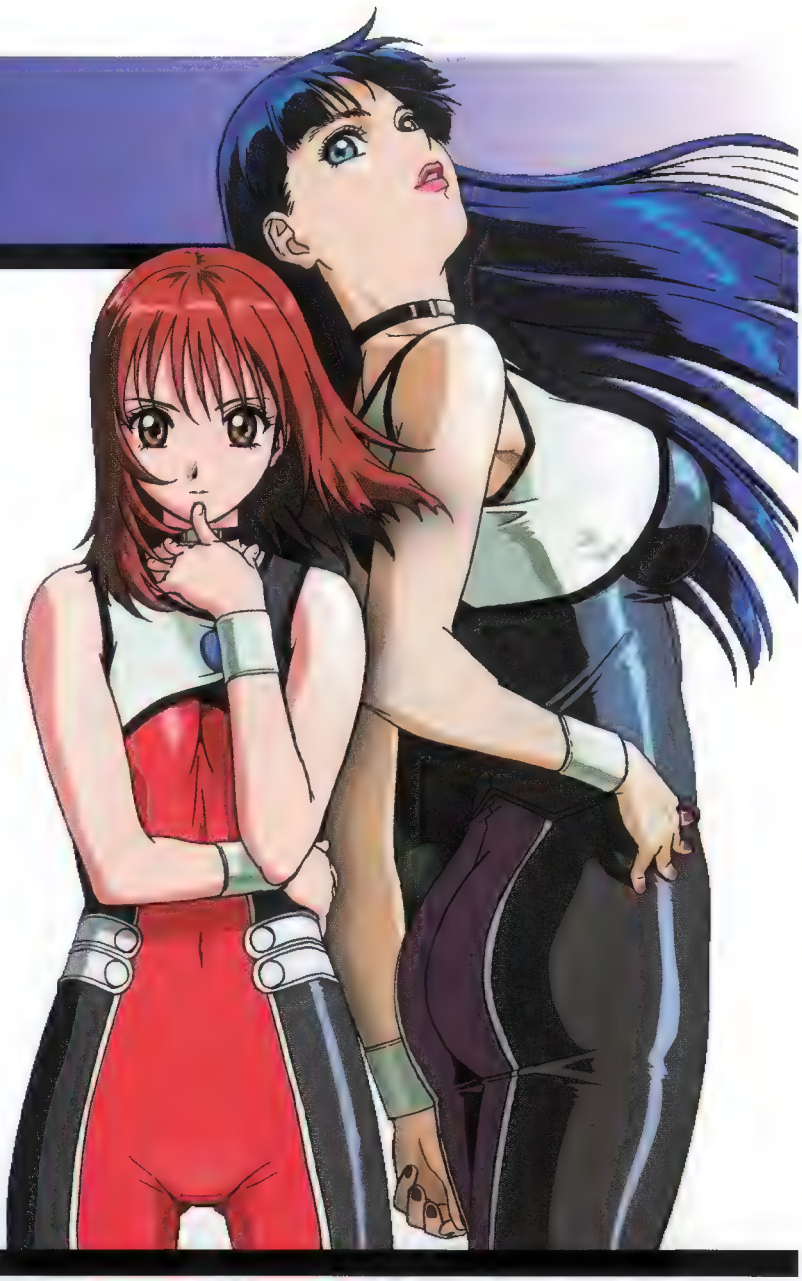
Her DNA is DOA

Geneshaft

words dave halverson



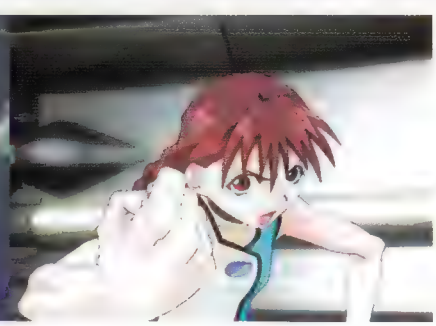
The marriage of CG and cel animation has come a long way in the last few years, evidenced by the complete discrepancy between layers in *Gene Shaft*, which makes no attempt to blend styles, but rather, unabashedly slaps them together—and that ends up being a big part of its allure.

Anime set millennia into the future are a dime a dozen, yet none have dealt us a future quite like *Gene Shaft*'s, where overpopulation and violence is brought under control by pre-determining a person's skills, genetically engineering them for non-violence and a particularly useful function. Women are bred in far greater numbers than men as well—no argument there. Meanwhile, Earth is being run by five standard-bred elderly gentlemen, kept alive through life-extension techniques and named after classic science fiction scribes, who meet in a circle in the forest (and they're still looking for Saddam). All is well until space throws a wrench into the works in the form of a giant monolithic ring, floating ominously in space like something from a Stanley Kubrick film. At first, the massive construct serves as a minor annoyance, but as the story unfolds, its purpose and structure are about to be broached by a team of five very diverse females as the massive space cruiser Bilkis prepares to take its maiden voyage.

The lead character, Mika Seido, whose genetic powers have yet to blossom, has been called upon to pilot the Shaft, a break-away craft with buggy software which turns out to be the crew's only hope against the ring's immense power. She is joined by her old friend Sofia Galgalim (a massive woman with a well-adjusted temperament), the 12-year-old, cute, bubbly and very intelligent Tiki Musicanova, Mir Lotus (arrogant queen of the bitches—supposedly perfect in every way) and her brown-nosing companion Remmy Levi-Strauss (no joke), whose purpose seems to be telling Mir how very cool she is. So the stage has been set for interstellar chick wars...but wait! What about the men? The man in charge, Lord Sergi Sneak, is a murderous bastard with obvious bad intentions, and Captain Hiroto Amigawa (who has a funky connection Mika) seems human one minute and maniacal the next. Disobey a direct order and he will shoot you. It's only DNA, after all.

Gene Shaft is nothing if not totally interesting at every turn. It exudes technology at its highest form, yet nothing works, and humanity at its most evolved, which appears as evil and misguided as ever. Reduced to a mere manufacturing process, many of the conflicts aboard the Bilkis mimic the very things genetic engineering hoped to wean out. I guess you can take the chance out of humanity but you can't take humanity out of the cosmic gutter.

"Anime set millennia into the future are a dime a dozen, yet none have dealt us a future quite like Gene Shaft's..."



Geneshaft vol.1

studio: **bandai entertainment** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **100 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

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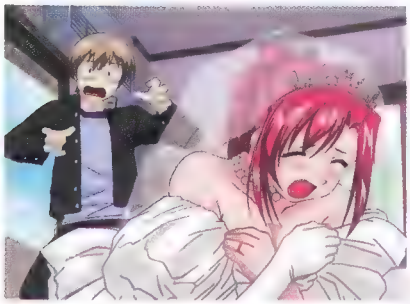
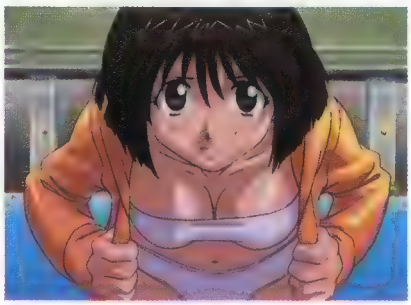
Please Teacher! vol.1

studio: **bandai entertainment** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **100 minutes**





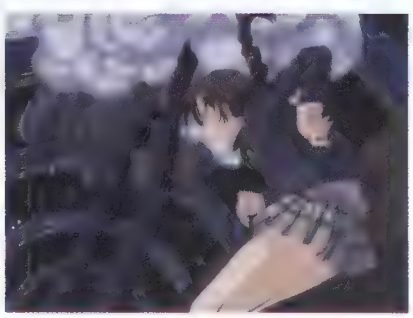
So the title sounds like a cheesy, '80s, soft-core porn flick you catch on Cinemax when you have insomnia. But it could be worse. It could read "Tekken." *Please Teacher!!* has all the elements of a genre-blending situational romantic dra-medy. You've got Kei Kusanagi, a gentle-hearted boy whom I can only assume to be an albino due to his pale hair, red eyes, and sickly disposition. Then there's his teacher, Ms. Kazami, who happens to be an alien who decided that earth was a good vacation spot. When Kei accidentally discovers Ms. Kazami's secret and the two are caught by the school principal in a compromising position, Kei is forced to lie about their relationship in order to save her job. For all intents and purposes, Kei and Ms. Kazami are now husband and wife! Not that Kei is all that opposed to the idea of being married to his hot young red-headed alien teacher, but keeping this massive secret from his friends won't be all that easy. Add in Marie, the slightly damaged alien ship computer with a habit for teleporting people to the wrong dimension and you have a playful adventure in the same vein as *Ah! My Goddess*.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

play rating ●●●●●

Gatekeepers 21 vol.1

studio: **pioneer animation** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **75 minutes**



"Gate open!" With a squeaky battle-cry and the flicker of a specially tailored cell phone, the multitude of invading aliens is incinerated by a terrible fireball, courtesy of an Invader Hunter of AEGIS. All that remains are sparkling crystallized stars that litter the charred ground. Mission accomplished.
Ayane Isuzu is possibly the least popular girl in school, and Miu Manazuru is definitely one of the "in-crowd." The social outcast meets the social butterfly. Ayane has been given the moderately difficult task of simultaneously recruiting her schoolmate Miu for AEGIS, tutoring Miu in her fledgling Gate abilities, and repelling the new wave of Invaders. That sounds easy enough. Except for the fact that the Invaders are multiplying at a horrific rate, and Miu isn't exactly what one would call a battle-hardened soldier. In fact, the word "inept" comes more readily to mind. Returning with a darker feel, thoroughly entertaining character interaction (the hijinks between the brooding Ayane and the super-perky Miu are not to be missed), and completely over-the-top action scenes, *Gatekeepers 21* is an instant addiction.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

play rating ●●●●◐

Please Teacher!

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James Cameron's Dark Angel: The Complete First Season

Fox DVD

One of the biggest injustices in recent TV history has got to be Fox's premature cancellation of *Dark Angel* to make room for sludge like *Mr. Personality*. Knowing that Cameron had big plans for the show going forward, one can't help but feel cheated by Fox's desire to transfix the masses of Americans who spend the majority of their lives parked in front of a 19-inch TV adorned with rabbit ears and a "clicker" remote. Nevertheless, the season one DVD is everything you'd expect from the man that who put us on the Titanic: a six-DVD set that includes audio commentary on selected episodes, three behind-the-scenes featurettes, audition tapes, a blooper reel and a video game trailer for the underrated game from Radical Software. For the uninitiated, Dark Angel is a hyper-sexy genetically engineered super chick (the amalgamation of 25 DNA streams) played by Jessica Alba, who escapes from her military creators to find others of her kind and do some good along the way, in a not so distant future plagued by political and economic collapse. The premise makes way for a futuristic parody of sorts, reminiscent of the '30s depression era and the underworld it spurred. The extras, spread generously over four of the six discs encompassing all 21 episodes, reek of a production intended for DVD from day one. "Genesis" gives us an insightful look at the collaborative process, with extensive comments from Cameron, creator and executive producer Charles Eglee, Alba and the depth of the cast; "Seattle Ain't What It Used to Be" delves deep into the look of the show and the overall production, which was surprisingly detailed down to those dreary underground tunnels that, much to my surprise, were completely fabricated. Cameron doesn't make the scene for any of the commentary—Eglee and company do the honors—but you get the feeling Eglee was the pulse of the show anyway and Cameron more of a collaborator. Nevertheless, *Dark Angel* was the best TV to be produced by Fox since Buffy and now they're both gone. *The Complete First Season* is the quintessential collection. They really don't miss a single thing—not even a rat on toast. *–Tom Ham*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

T2: Extreme DVD

Artisan Entertainment

When *T2: Judgment Day* came out back in 1991, it truly was ahead of its time. With the help of extraordinary special effects, James Cameron told such a fantastic story that when it was over, we were all begging for more. Now with the release of *T3: Rise of the Machines* coming next month, Artisan Entertainment decided to come out with a pretty tricked out DVD for T2. Digitally mastered from a brand-new 1080p, 24sf high-definition digital telecine transfer, *T2: Extreme* was digitally restored, frame by frame. Bottom line, this version is better than the one that was shown in theatres. The T2: Extreme DVD kicks major ass. This 2-disc set is probably the coolest DVD we've seen in a long time. Disc One has the *Special Edition Version* (with 16 minutes of additional never before scenes), rare behind the scenes footage and a very informative and funny commentary with James Cameron and William Wisher. Disc Two has an all new documentary entitled, "No Fear But What We Make," which tells the role that T2 had in the evolution of digital special effects and modern filmmaking and a retrospective montage called "T2: On the Set" that has many candid footage of the cast and production crew during filming. Another cool feature on the DVD is the Infiltration Unit Simulator and T2 FX Studio. Here you can morph your imported images into a T—1000 or a T-800 Terminator. And with the aid of a special effects primer with different interfaces, it will integrate your headshots with the various Terminator models. *–Tom Ham*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

Scourge of Worlds: A Dungeons & Dragons Adventure

Rhino Home Video

The tabletop RPG, video games, board games, comics, novels, Saturday morning cartoon and online community just aren't enough: what the world needs is a 3D CGI Dungeons & Dragons interactive film that lets the viewer control the story and endings. And in a wink, so it shall be done. Rhino Home Video and DKP present *Scourge of Worlds: A Dungeons & Dragons Adventure*, a fully rendered D&D adventure riddled with 20 decision points (my first time through, I killed the lot in under 20 minutes), four different endings and a possible 900 story combinations. I must admit there's definitely something to this tried but so far not so true formula. The decisions presented, given the deep gist of the storyline, have severe implications. For instance, at one point, awakened by a strange premonition, rather than wake my weary fellow travelers after a night of grog swilling (and a bar room scuffle I helped encourage—another iffy decision on my part), I opted to let them sleep, which lead to a dear friend's tragic death and a premature ending—aye! The cues are not so black and white as to brand this a gimmick, but cut directly from the D&D cloth. To assure its authenticity, the *Scourge of Worlds* scripts were combed over by Wizards of the Coast to ensure it stay true to the material; they also had a hand in the power levels of the characters and their compatibility with the beasts in the story. The CG, which isn't exactly *The Spirits Within*, is of mid- to hi-range quality akin to TV fare like *Max Steele, ReBoot, Jimmy Nuetron* and *Starship Troopers*—nothing mind boggling, but it gets the job done and shows glimmers of technical prowess in places like armor and facial expression. The initial DVD is set to release June 10, followed by a Collector's Edition in September that will include two additional endings, 15 minutes of extra footage, a making-of featurette and an exclusive painted collectible Dungeons & Dragons plastic miniature of Mialee the elf wizard, one of the lead characters in the movie. Scourge, on the heels of the upcoming games, and Legions online should keep D&D fans busy, if not unemployed, through to the holidays. *–Dave Halverson*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

Black Hawk Down Deluxe Edition

Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment

Black Hawk Down will go down in history as one of the most important war films of our time. There is no political agenda here. No issue about race or supremacy. *Black Hawk Down* is about the chaos and tragedy of war. Through Ridley Scott's brilliant direction, the movie excites us with its incredible firefights on the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, but at the same time, it arouses our sympathy and anger for what happened on that fateful day.
The initial DVD release of *Black Hawk Down* was pretty pathetic in terms of special features and extras. I remember watching it and wondering why they were so skimpy. Well, now I know. The Deluxe Edition DVD is a definitive three-disc set with over three hours of new material. Our favorite: "The Essence of Combat: Making Black Hawk Down." This extra is comprised of six documentaries (each roughly 30 minutes long) explaining everything from the military training to the special effects to the music. It really puts a new perspective on the movie and what went into making it. Other key features include 8 deleted and alternate scenes, commentary by US Special Forces Veterans (1993), commentary by the author (Mark Bowden) and a Multi-Angle Sequence of a key firefight. *–Tom Ham*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

Narc
Paramount Home Video

From the opening scene, you know this movie is not going to be a pretty boy cops and robbers type of film. *Narc* is so pumped full of testosterone, violence and nastiness, it oozes with cool. The film is about the dangerous world of a narcotics officer. When the investigation of a slain officer goes unsolved, a suspended narcotics officer, Nick Tellis (Jason Patric) is called in to investigate. Teaming up with Henry Oak (Ray Liotta), the slain officer's partner who will stop at nothing to avenge his death, both men delve into the seamy narcotics world to solve the case. As they start to unravel secrets and clues, it takes them to a place where they're not prepared to go.

Although it's not packed with special features and extras, the *Narc* DVD isn't too shabby. There are four featurettes: "Narc: Making the Deal," "Narc: Shooting Up and Narc: The Visual Trip," a great commentary with writer/director Joe Carnahan and editor John Gilroy and, of course, the theatrical trailer. *–Tom Ham*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

Secretary
Lions Gate

Mr. Grey (a roiling James Spader) hasn't had much luck with secretaries. His law office, decorated with all the overindulgent style gross money can by, glows with a help-wanted sign, garishly begging for the "help" of an aide. His life obviously needs more than just the organization of a good secretary, but never could he have prepared for the assistance his new hire brings when she walks in for an interview, barely out of recovery for self-mutilation and a psychotic past. Lee (a pitch-perfect Maggie Gyllenhaal) is young and attractive; the job is hers...with a price. Mr. Grey is obsessive and punishing, taking his tightly wound frustrations out on his new secretary, who eventually begins to actually enjoy it, finding pleasure in its routine; at least she's receiving the attention. When he turns his focus to other things, she becomes dejected, exhibiting a fetishistic tendency for his command. It's become a relationship of sorts. The sadomasochistic currents running through the movie aren't too dark or too goofy, and they carry the tortured characters along an interesting emotional roller coaster. Eventually Lee (Jeremy Davies) attempts a "proper" relationship with Peter, whose presence signals a much broader, jealous longing in Mr. Grey than even he is capable of understanding. *Secretary* approaches its material humorously but with a sad reality: In every relationship there remains the unspoken, dysfunctional land mines we all find different ways of disarming. *–Brady Fiechter*

dvd ●●●●●
extras ●●●●●

digital versatile disc

The Animatrix

words brady fiechter

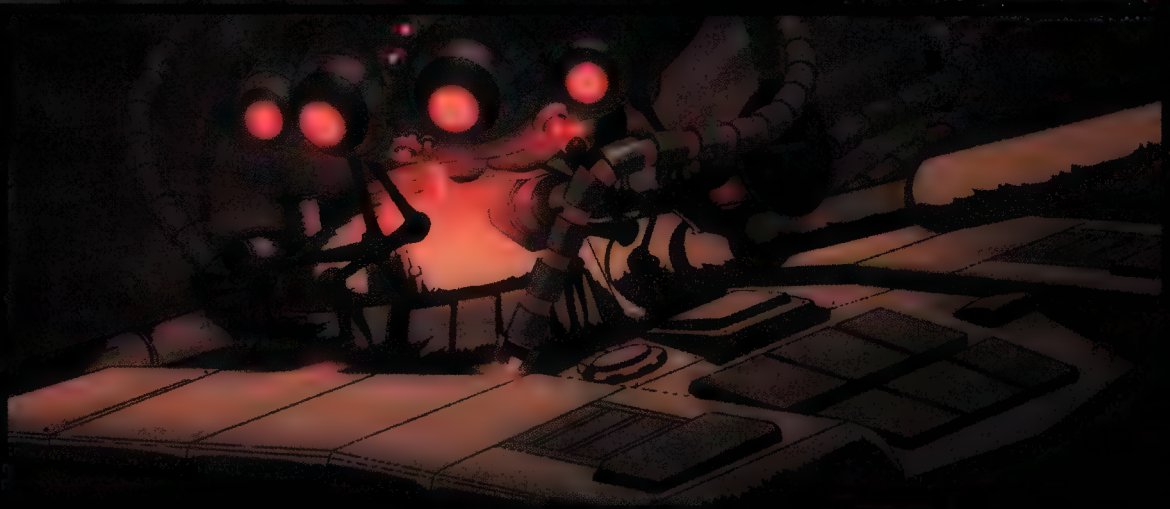
Warner Bros./Village Roadshow Pictures
Available June 3

"In the beginning, there was man, and for a time, it was good." But man, creating his society of robots, enjoying his dominance and godlike pupeteering, soon became "the architect of his own demise." His was given knowledge, understanding, a will to expand, and out of his ways came war and persecution. Out of his ways was born the apocalypse, the seeds planted from the nuclear attack on the robot-infested world he once imagined would save his soul. "May there be mercy on man and machines for their sins."

There is no mercy, and man horrifically falls into the rule of the machines, who find a way to harvest human biomechanical energy for nourishment. Man became the god he worshiped, became his own creator, and in his creation came a new universe—a virtual reality ruled by the unimaginable powers of the artificial lifeforms.

You've seen the Matrix, and you know what these creatures intent is, but until now, you've only been introduced to the result of their actions and not the cause. Enter The Animatrix, a magnificent collection of short animated films that provides, subtly and abstractly, puzzle pieces into the incomplete picture of the Matrix world, adding to the immense intrigue of the sci-fi mythos.

Setting up the genesis and purpose of the beautifully creepy Sentinel beings, profoundly and with extreme intent in The Second Renaissance I & II, this stretch in the tale is only a slice of where The Animatrix eventually takes you. The human race begins to show its fight back; individuality and free will begin to take shape. A better understanding of what the artificial beings' world holds for humanity and the way in which individuals cope and explore their dreamscape begins to take shape.



There is not one of these dramatically different shorts that is necessarily better than the other, and they all exhibit very bold artistic achievements in very distinct ways. Dialogue is light for the most part, giving way to the towering strength of the imagery. The four films written by Matrix directors Andy and Larry Wachowski carry the most weight within their words, treading coyly in Biblical and eastern religion philosophies that stay grippingly in tune with the feature film. With all the different styles, approaches and techniques drawn on by the eclectic group of directors, the effect can reside in the individual taste. So wildly abstract are the phantasmagoric images of Matriculated—the final film, written and directed by Peter Chung of Aeon Flux fame—that some might find it all surreal nonsense in search of restraint. Like the entire collection, I found it mesmerizing.

The mood throughout is somber and desperate. Anime is often violent and exaggerated, going where traditional animation here in the States would not dare, and The Animatrix is certainly not without its moments of crushed heads and dismembered bodies. But violence is absolutely not its draw. You watch the Animatrix for the thrill of its look and its ability to transport you into an intriguing reality. Stylistic triumphs dominate, offering a completely new experience from one chapter to the next, blending digital and the traditional in several trippy ways. When again will you find nine animation shorts, full of vision and ideas, blessed by the touch of Japanese design strokes, inspired by the Matrix, on one DVD?

DVD Special Features

When you've come down from the high of The Animatrix, go back up with the extras the radically different talents behind the crafting of these films have generously included. For those anime neophytes searching for a better understanding of what ultimately inspired The Matrix and its Animatrix counterpart, the Scrolls to Screen — The History and Culture of Anime is an interesting look inside a very unique world that most of us are only just being introduced to.

Mining the behind-the-scenes gold of The Animatrix, seven detailed featurettes explore everything from director profiles—suddenly more appealing, given the unique nature of the project—interviews and more. Commentaries are always a treat, but here they once again pull additional gravity, delving in to the abstract mystery of the film. Four audio commentaries have been included to follow the images in The Second Renaissance Part I & II, Program and World Record. The Japanese directors have a very distinct way of viewing their art and its process, which comes through in fascinating fashion.

While the least valuable of the bunch, Enter the Matrix Game Trailer joins the satisfying extras with a flyby of the creation of the now-released Enter the Matrix video game. Jada Pinkett and Carrie-Anne Moss are a few of the heavy hitters who were involved in the project and give their trained two-cents on its making.

Capitol

Radiohead

Hail to the Thief

And once again, Radiohead delivers an esoteric work of _____. Enter your own description for the unconventional band's upcoming, completely transfixing album, *Hail to the Thief*. Radiohead haven't gotten any less impenetrable, any less pretentious for the listeners who've cringed on Insomniac and Kid A, and they continue to invent and create heavy electronic pieces to fit into their warped rock puzzle that will snuff the early-years crowd. Those who take to Radiohead's pungent songwriting, prepare to be floored. Ok, end of general praise, because a complete version of the album is not available yet. But despite missing its full intention, I love what I'm hearing so far: the band continues to evolve while tapping more into their *OK Computer* and *The Bends* days. My definition is "brilliance." *–BF*

Jive

(hed) Planet Earth

Blackout

It's a wonder that (hed) Planet Earth aren't living large with the likes of Korn, Linkin Park, P.O.D. and the rest of the nu metal crop. Picking up where rap metal leaves off, (hed) PE offer way more flavors on an album that takes you on a journey like so many truly great records of old. Rather than stringing together a collection of like tracks, pounding out soft rhymes between thunderous choruses, *Blackout* plays more like an old Frank Zappa record, shifting and squirming, reinventing itself in brilliant spurts at every turn. Their fusion of hip-hop and metal, mashed in with choice bits of scratching and synth, is eclectic to the point of being ahead of its time. Once the world catches up and they are living large, let's hope they continue to pump out tunes as powerful as "Bury Me," as TRL-friendly as "Blackout," as heartfelt as "Get Away" and as just plain brilliant as "Crazy Life." Linkin who? This is the true power—go get it now. *–DH*

Maverick

Madonna

American Life

So I guess we need to understand Madonna's genuine American life, as told through all her views and joys and sorrows on the career-low American Life. If you've heard the pervasive radio play of the title track, you've heard the best the album has to offer—not good when even that one falls apart; she now wants to amaturely rap about her yoga and pillates and hotties. Madonna has never had much of an agenda outside of making infectious music for the people, and she always kept her easily digestible words in service of the beats. Now we get Madonna straining, most the time awkwardly, to fit some sort of meaning into her overstuffed lyrics. On the past two albums, it was much easier to throw on the headphones and enjoy the song structures, but with American Life, the album feels too flat and banal, and acoustic touches from a listless guitar don't help. *–BF*

V2/BMG

The White Stripes

Elephant

White Stripes don't subscribe to friendly, compartmentalized rock, which makes this ragged, masteful work even more satisfying to drown out the maddness of the world. Meg White pounds out the stacatto rythms, Jack White obliquly crunches the guitars, and both scratch their vocals into the pungent, spare arrangements. The album is as difficult as it is cult cool, taking its time to wrap you in its undiluted rock vibe. If the White Stripes are to be accused of operating with an alienating self-indulgence, then such is the destined path to the year's best pure rock record. *–BF*

Republic/Universal

Godsmack

Faceless

On their latest and mostly mechanical collection of anger management issues, Godsmack are showing wear in their sound. But it's more than just trusting a formula too much; *Faceless* lacks the energy and force of the past albums. One song melts into the other, wearing the album down drastically toward the end. Even some of the new is a bit old: the heavy sludge of "I Stand Alone" was lifted right off the *Scorpion King* soundtrack. Still, with a couple jackhammer delights, fans won't want to pass. *–BF*

Dreamcworks

AFI

Sing the Sorrow

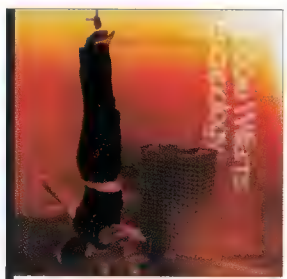
After hammering away in the Bay Area, mired in old-school punk-lite, AFI finally go into the black light, undergoing a Goth transformation that has elevated their music from garden variety to seedling. It's amazing just how much and how well they've reinvented themselves for their major label debut under the watchful eye of Pumpkins' producer Butch Vig. For the most part, this is a new nu metal band that cast Goth guitar rituals and soaring opuses like they're children of Christian Death. "Miseria Cantare—The Beginning" enchants and recruits; the bell tolls, organs soar, guitars whine—I live for this shit. By "Bleed Black" I was card-carrying. Soak up the whispers before "Silver and Cold," tell me "Girl not Grey" isn't one off the year's best singles, and then settle in for cheddar like "The Great Disappointment" with its thick, prodding, unmistakably Rickenbacker bass, soaring guitars and searing vocals, the magical "Celluloid Dream," and the smooth glass of "The Leaving Song...but home is nowhere." Davey Havok isn't a singer, he's an instrument; his range is remarkable—intoxicating regardless of what key he's in. A coat of black paint and AFI is born anew. (Let the CD run a minute after it ends. Make sure the lights are out and prepare to disappear for awhile.) *–DH*

BMG

Evanescence

Fallen

Goth pop-rock that definitely rocks, infects with its pop, and doesn't tread too far in the darkness to call depressive, *Fallen* grows by the listen. The album hits its highs with the heavier, hook-driven songs—the languidly beautiful "Going Under," the potent energy of "Bring Me To Life," the driving tech shine of "Everybody's Fool." And sinks low in the orchestrated pop ether of new age keyboards and soggy lyrics on cuts like "My Immortal." Even when you know the words and music sometime flirt with sappy sincerity, it's a bold sound that keeps you listening, underpinned by the commanding appeal of lead singer Amy Lee's lovely, fiery voice. *–BF*



Virgin

Robbie Williams

Escapology

Robbie Willaims sold his soul to the devil to sound like Elton John and look like a teddy bear, and he's enjoying every minute of it, as well he should. After last year's disappointing *Sing When You're Winning*, Robbie's back to doing what he does best on *Escapology*: being our Elton John sequel—and I mean that as high praise. This is high-concept pop, the kind you don't have to hide in your car alone to listen to. But Robbie, really: "I'm here to make money and get laid/It's nice to meet you, now let me go and wash my hand cause you just met the world's most handsome man." Dude, a little modesty, please. The big bright shining star on *Escapology*, "One Fine Day," proves RW knows how to make his audience feel, and "Me and Monkey" proves he may actually be as cool as he claims to be. *–DH*

artificial

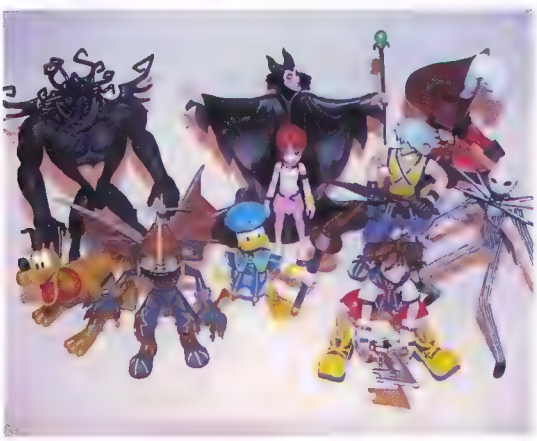
but not intelligent

TMNT

No true TMNT fan should be without Playmate's special limited edition cold cast statues—9 inches of hand-painted hard-core turtle action. Each (Donatello shown) comes with a certificate of authenticity signed by the sculptor along a detailed base and weapon of choice. I'd say "cowabunga!" but they don't say that anymore (thank God). Look for all four, available at the usual online haunts. Pre-booking is definitely recommended. ($129.99-139.99)

Warcraft III

From Toycom's new Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos series: Prince Arthas as the Death Knight, the nefarious Dark Lord Tichondrius, and Shandris Feathermoon, a Night Elf Archer. Sculpted to scale with careful attention to detail, the figures stand from 6" to a staggering 8.5" and feature fourteen points of articulation. Up next: Diablo!



Kingdom Hearts

Great games deserve great action figures; everyone knows it, few respect it. Of those few, Toycom are leading the charge. From their Kingdom Hearts series 1 (beginning their 3rd run, series 2 are coming soon): Sora with Jack Skellington, Kairi with Maleficent, Donald Duck with Air Soldier, Darkside with Pluto, and Riku with Captain Hook (www.kingdomhearts.com). This may be your last chance at a set of Series 1, so don't delay. These are amazing figures.

Auto Modellista

Here's a trend we can most definitely get behind as the floor series here at **play** gets underway: racing-game toys! Hobbico Inc's R/C Microsizers Pro featuring Auto Modellista sport adjustable trim for fine tuning steering control and pivot-point suspension, plus they go like the devil on a 45-second charge. The cool remote, which features switches rather than analog-type steering, even has a wind up antenna! A must-have for any true gamer (www.microsizers.com).

Portable DVD player

Samsung DVD-L100

www.samsung.com
$999

For the ultimate in portable DVD viewing pleasure, look no further than Samsung's DVD-L100, the first portable DVD with Memory Stick compatibility. So why is this cool? Imagine having the flexibility to transfer MP3s from your PC and then playing them back on your L100? Or taking pictures with your digital camera and then later viewing them on the screen. And speaking of the screen, the DVD-L100 has the biggest screen of any portable DVD player out there. Sporting a massive 10-inch, true 16:9 widescreen aspect ratio, the L100's screen is more than double the size of competing players. But the coolest aspect of the Samsung DVD-L100 is its size. When you fold the player, it measures a very slim 0.9". The L100 also has DTS sound processing, Dolby Digital capability and 2X audio playback. With the optional battery pack, you'll have enough power to last 6 hours. Coupled with dual headphone jacks and a wireless remote control, the Samsung DVD-L100 is pretty damn slick.

Portable media player/recorder

Panasonic SV-AV30

www.panasonic.com
$tbd

Living in a society so preoccupied with "size," it's nice to see something really cool come in the smallest of packages. Introducing the Panasonic SV-AV30, a 4-in-1 A/V SD recorder that records digital images, shoots digital video (in MPEG 4 format mind you), functions as a digital voice recorder and plays digital music files (MP3, AAC and WMA formats) to boot. Part of Panasonic's new e-wear line of devices (get it, electronics that you can wear), the SV-AV30 is the perfect geek toy that is undeniably hip. There is even a docking station that allows you to record and view footage on a TV screen. So that episode of 24 you just taped? Imagine watching it on a 2-inch LCD screen in the palm of your hand. Incorporating SD technology, the SV-AV30 comes with a 64MB SD Memory Card. This translates to about 35 min of MPEG 4 video, 3 min of MPEG 2 video and 1 hour of MP3s. We'd go with a 512 MB card which can hold over 4 hours of video. Other key features include a built-in speaker, USB cable, remote control and a stylish carrying case. James Bond, eat your heart out.

gear

PC surround system

Creative MegaWorks THX 6.1

www.creative.com
$300

Nowadays consumers want to get the ultimate experience when using their PCs. Whether it is watching a DVD movie or being engrossed by a compelling game, computers aren't just for work anymore. Introducing the Creative MegaWorks THX 6.1 650 Speaker System, the only speaker system you'll ever need for your PC. With over 600-watts of thumping goodness, we have yet to hear a set of speakers that sound this good. DirectSound 3D and EAX Advanced HD games will get the added benefit of the additional rear speaker in the center. Is it excessive? Hell yes. Do we care? Hell no. These babies deliver seven-channel BASH amplification for distortion-free playback and 99dB NR with frequency response of 25Hz-20kHz thanks to six incredibly shielded speakers and one kick-ass dual-flared ported subwoofer. While music sounded incredibly clear and resonant, movies and games are really what brought these speakers to life. And with a price tag of under $300 ($100 off if you buy the speakers with a Sound Blaster Audigy 2), you'll be in gamer's nirvana.

Gaming gear

Monster Accessories

www.monstercable.com

It's almost shocking the quality of audio components you can get for your PS2 or Xbox these days for just under $200.00. Given the fact that Monster includes THX certified cables (which alone run around 40.00) this compact system is not only a great buy, but pumps out amazing sound; not the pingy treble heavy clatter you might except for the money, but thick rich acoustics and deep, meaty bass. The 130 watt system (65 watts RMS) comes with 5 satellite speakers and stands (each with a mid-range driver and tweeter) a subwoofer, and a wireless remote, and it looks as cool as it sounds....While you're at it if your TV supports progressive scan and you're not reaping the benefits look into some Monster component cables; the difference, we assure you, is astounding (you'll want to play Primal all over again). Monster makes by far the highest grade cables available, (they look hella cool too) and cables do matter; check out the full line at monstercable.com

MATURE
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Violence
Game Experience May
Change During Online Play

OVERTHROW HITLER'S EVIL EMPIRE.

You are B.J. Blazkowicz, a US Army Ranger recruited by the OSA and the Allies' top specialist in covert operations, heavy weapons and assassination. Hitler's head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, is twisting science and the occult into an army capable of annihilating the Allies. The balance of victory is in your hands.

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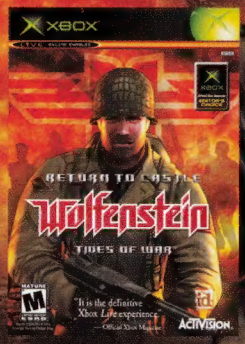
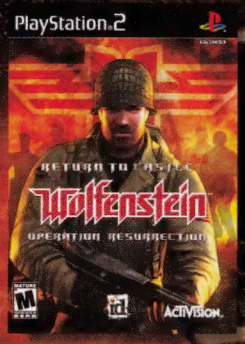
Engage in an epic, story-driven single-player campaign across over 30 levels.





Face squad-based multiplayer battles against up to 15 others via Xbox *Live*™ and intense split-screen co-op action.

Complete unique objectives, including silently assassinating Nazi officers.

PlayStation.2

XBOX LIVE

nervesoftware.com

RASTER PRODUCTIONS
rasterproductions.com

id
idsoftware.com

ACTIVISION.
activision.com

Screenshots taken from Xbox™ video game system and PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system gameplay.

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CLOCK TOWER™ 3

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Blood and Gore
Violence

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